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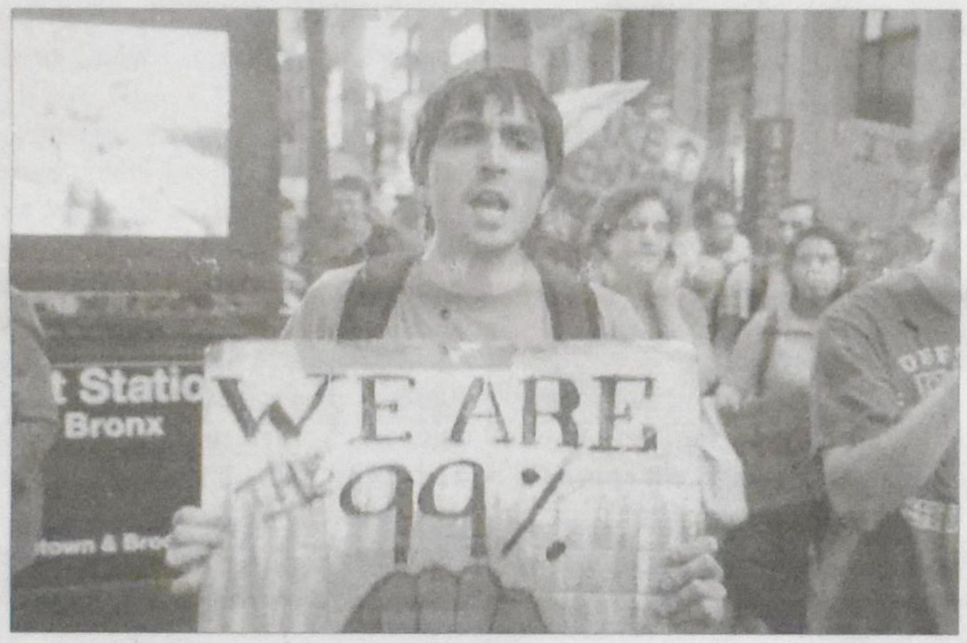
CHRISTIAN COURIER

Most Occupiers sent home for Christmas *Will their message continue to ring in the New Year?*

Mike Wevers

For months now the Occupy Movement has held center stage in many world cities, as resilient demonstrators found ways to keep their encampments in place. For the most part, peaceful Canadian demonstrations were met with restrained enforcement, enabling the activists to give voice to their litany of concerns. However, apparently uncoordinated and haphazard international efforts around the world, like budget cut protests in Greece, often overshadowed local protests to the point where their message was lost. A growing majority of people the Occupiers were supposedly



representing were also becoming increasingly upset about the activists' obstinate refusal to quit their occupations. And there is the rub: were the Occupiers truly representing the "99%"?

'We are the 99%'

While many of the activists have long been involved in anti-globalization protests we see at international monetary and trade meetings, Occupy Wall Street has its origins with the Canadian website *Adbusters*. It called on its followers to occupy Wall Street in much the same way that the Arab Spring erupted in Tahrir Square in Egypt. Shortly after the *Adbusters* "call to arms", an American blog page gave the movement life when its proclamation that "we are the 99%" went viral.

[T]he American middle class shouldered much of the economic turmoil of the last recession. They lost their jobs and their homes, and have not yet benefited from a hesitant recovery.

The catchphrase points to the inequitable distribution of wealth in the United States. Depending on the data used, it can lead to varying

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How mobile technology helped Haiti

Bethany Van Lingen

Through simple mobile technology, World Vision transformed the way aid was delivered to the Haitian people after a 7.0 magnitude earthquake in January 2010.

Paula Quinlan, Jay Narhan and Richard Lankas came to Haiti as part of the World Vision team. One of their tasks was to set up a mobile messaging system using laptops and hand-held mobile devices. Known as Last Mile Mobile Solutions (LMMS), this system allows aid workers in remote areas to record and store information in computers. The computers and hand held devices communicate with each other, sharing numbers stored and reports created through a portable wireless network created by LMMS.

In addition to Haiti, the greater LMMS team is at work in several African countries, as well as Pakistan, and has proven so effective that World Vision has called for greater use of the system. A deadline to expand to countries like South Sudan and Somalia is set for March of next year.

Before the success of LMMS, program manager Narhan saw data cemeteries in countries like Haiti.

"We were walking into temporary shelters filled with paper, floor to ceiling. No one sits there and mines all that data," says Narhan.

Local staff would sit around for days writing distribution reports for the end of the month,

Haitian people stood in line for hours to get aid. Women and single mothers sometimes had to wait in the dark, says project support officer Quinlan. The women would have preferred to go back to their tents in daylight, as these shelters were not their own and were at risk of being looted by others living in the camp.

Without the LMMS system, there was also more room for fraud.

"(Aid) distribution was very chaotic," Keith Chibafa, LMMS program manager in Haiti says. "There were people in line who had no business being there."

Facing these issues, LMMS was made part of the 90-day emergency response plan in Haiti. It was adapted from working in food distribution programs in Africa to respond to the crisis in Haiti, where the system was used to give out

Aid workers use the LMMS system to administer relief in Haiti.

food, as well as blankets, tents and medical kits to the Haitian people.

World Vision staff were able to

See **Technology** *on page 2*

News

Occupiers *continued*

specific breakdowns. Data from 2007 indicated that one percent of the American people hold around 35 percent of the nation's wealth. If you include the next 19 percent, you tie up another 50 percent; in other words, around 80 percent of American wealth is held by 20 percent of the nation's people. As importantly to the protestors, the past decade has seen the disparity grow as the recession hammered the middle and lower classes much more harshly than the economic elite. In fact, one of the more serious complaints of the protestors in the United States is that the financial bailouts at the start of Obama's Presidency benefited the rich but were paid for by the poor American taxpayer.

The 'Buffett Tax'

As the American political system still deals with the fallout of this summer's debt limit fiasco, they are no closer to achieving agreement on how to deal with future fiscal and budgetary challenges. Even though one of the richest men in the United States, Warren Buffett, understands that the tax system needs to change so that he, and his colleagues, should pay more, the Republicans continue to press the no tax increase pledge.

Some of the "Buffett tax" detractors point to Buffett's teaming up with Bill Gates of Microsoft to have the philanthropic Gates Foundation disburse most of their accumulated wealth to charitable causes as reason not to support increased taxes on the very wealthy. However, they miss the point that even Buffett agrees he should have been taxed more so the American people (through their government) may have used that wealth to reduce inequities sooner.

It is difficult to determine exactly what the Occupy movement is trying to achieve, but on one of the United States websites a clear goal is to remove the influence of money from the American political system and through democratic action bring the political power back to the people. Consequently, while the movement diminishes the plight of the truly poor by lumping them in the "we are the 99%" group, the movement knows it requires the support of the broad middle class if it is to achieve its goal. Quite possibly, the movement is achieving broader support in some United States centres than in Canada because the American middle class shouldered much of the economic turmoil of the last recession. They lost their jobs and their homes, and have not yet benefited from a hesitant recovery.

The Canadian Scene

Support for the Occupy movement was widespread in Canada, with occupations appearing in over 30 cities from coast to coast. However, it does not appear to be as broadly based as its U.S. and other international counterparts. Middle class Canadians, like the Canadian economy, weathered the most recent international recession fairly well and have no interest in seeking significant change. The Canadian movement also did not have a focused goal like its American counterpart to force democratic change, nor the overthrow of a dictator like the Arab Spring. How, then, do you negotiate a deal to end the occupation when there are no specifics which can be delivered? Especially when the local leaders were dealing with civic officials who had no real power to deliver change.

A drug related death in the Vancouver site and the fact that the leaders of the occupations were drawn primarily from the "usual suspects" of fringe Marxist-Leninists and anti-development organizations marginalized the whole movement in Canada. And to be frank, if the health concerns of the encampments were not sufficient to have the protestors go home, many of them will have welcomed the court injunctions to leave protest sites as the Canadian winter sets in. Yet, the Calgary site got a court reprieve early in December enabling it to stay at the Olympic Plaza site, giving it an ongoing venue from which to voice its concerns.

The Christmas Paradox

Winter brings Christmas, when we celebrate that God came into this world through a lowly manger, not a princely crib. When Jesus walked on the earth in his ministry it was primarily a walk with the poor people of Palestine, not with the rich and powerful. In one of our family's Christmas readers, *The Christmas Miracle*, which we bring out annually, there is a poem by Angelus Silesius entitled "Paradox" which reminds us that:

> All things are now reversed: the castle's in the cave.
> The crib becomes the throne, the night brings forth the day,
> The virgin bears a child; O man! reflect and say
> That heart and mind must be reversed in every way.

We should not ignore the message of the Occupy movement that the world should not be so inequitable. It should remain with us in the New Year to come, and each after that, as we seek to bring the Lord's justice to a world which so desperately needs it.

Mike Wevers is an independent consultant enjoying Christmas at home with his family in Edmonton.

Technology in Haiti *continued*

reach 20,000 people in Haiti with LMMS, faster and with more accountability. Today, things are normalizing in Haiti, says Chibafa, who lives in the nation's capital Port-au-Prince. He hopes to use LMMS in the health sector as well, as part of programs dealing with HIV, cholera and with the health of mothers and their children.

With LMMS, food and other aid is distributed through ID cards. Field staff list all the information from a person, take a photo of them and then create an ID card with a bar code to be scanned every time the person comes for aid. When a person gets their aid, their name is signed into the mobile device.

With the simple swipe of an ID card, field staff know who is supposed to get aid, how much they should get and when they are due to receive it. There is no going through the line twice, and no worry among aid recipients about being cheated out of the items they need for themselves and their families.

"[LMMS brings] a sense of dignity for these people. They can get their aid and go on with their lives," Chibafa says.

LMMS also enables aid workers to quickly and easily store the information they gather while giving out aid. These numbers can then be used to make computer created reports.

"Rather than sitting there crunching numbers in Excel, (the staff in Haiti) are out in the field," Chibafa says. There, the staff can see for themselves how their programs are working in the community.

Bringing LMMS to Haiti was messy, says Lankas, senior technical specialist. The Haitian aid workers were French-speaking and also not experienced with this type of technology. Lankas, of Kajiado, Kenya, stayed for eight months training the Haitian team. Over time, the local staff were able to grow comfortable with LMMS.

Narhan, of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, describes going into countries like Haiti as "putting a fresh set of eyes to practices that are 20 or 30 years old. People often want to stay with the status quo." However, LMMS staff work to show the local teams how much this technology will help them.

The LMMS system is very simple, Law says. It is equivalent to what mail carriers use when they deliver a package.

"This technology should be available to the poorest of the poor," says Otto Farkas, director for resource development and collaborative innovation. "With LMMS, we created our own solution."

Bethany Van Lingen (bethany.vanlingen@gmail.com) is a Bachelor of Journalism student at Ryerson University in Toronto.

Columns

From the Lab

Rudy Eikelboom

Organ donation, autism, and HC Q&A 1

In this season of giving gifts, I'm wondering: have you ever considered the gift of organ donation? Organ donation is a difficult and controversial issue for many, but in the worlds of medicine and life sciences research it is essential for preserving life and extending human knowledge.

Some bodily tissue can be donated while we are alive. Perhaps you know someone who has donated a kidney to a relative. Perhaps you donate blood. Some samples required for scientific research, too, can be collected from living individuals. Life science researchers looking at various illnesses often need to collect small tissue or blood samples from both people with the illness and healthy individuals to better understand the nature of the problem.

In many medical and research contexts, however, tissue is needed that can be collected only at death. For example, research into autism, or what is more accurately known as a constellation of related diseases, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), requires children's brain tissue. ASD is a puzzling childhood disorder in which children in their first few years of life exhibit communication disorders, a lack of social skills and repetitive behaviours such as rocking that can last their whole lives. For parents it raises profound questions about what has gone wrong in the normal development of their child.

One of the mysteries about ASD is its increasing prevalence. When it was first described in 1943 by Leo Kanner, ASD was identified in fewer than five of 10,000 children. By 2009 the U.S. figure was 90 per 10,000 for eight-year-old children. This increase may be partially due to changing definitions of ASD, as well as parents' and doctors' growing awareness, but a number of medical researchers suggest that the disorder may have an environmental trigger that is more prevalent nowadays than when it was first diagnosed. The trigger has not yet been identified, but researchers have ruled out vaccines, and there is no evidence that defective parenting plays a role.

Regardless of what this environmental trigger might be, it is clear that genetic factors do play a role in the likelihood that a child will suffer from this disorder: research has shown that if one identical twin has ASD, the second twin is much more likely to become autistic as well. However, like many other mental disorders, there does not appear to be a simple genetic flaw. Multiple genes each seem to play a small part, and consequently it isn't clear what triggers this lifelong disorder.

Autistic children often exhibit repetitive behaviours such as rocking. Organ donation is crucial to autism research, as it is only by comparing actual brain tissue that scientists can determine how brain structure and wiring has been altered by the disease.

To explore these questions, researchers benefit greatly from comparing brains of healthy children with those of children suffering from autism. Only by comparing actual brain tissue can they determine how brain structure and wiring has been altered by the disease. Unfortunately, given that not every death results in brains that can be used, opportunities to obtain this gift are rare.

If your children were to die when they are young, would you donate their brain tissue to be used for scientific research? My prayer for us all is that we never find ourselves in a situation in which this question could be posed to us. Any death is a loss, but the loss of a child is beyond words. At the same time, some of us have already faced the death of a child, and others could face this tragedy in the future. If you are ever faced with this heartbreaking situation, even as I would pray with the whole community for God's comfort in your loss, I would also pray that he would give you the grace to consider the donation of your child's organs.

My decision to sign an organ donor card is grounded in the first answer to the Heidelberg Catechism: "*I am not my own but belong . . . to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ.*" Because I belong to a God who loves me and will raise me up in the last days, I should not worry about my body. As Christians, we serve a Lord who gave his Son to save us. As parents, we can do no less. Christians should be at the forefront of the campaign to provide tissue for organ donations and for scientific research. This is one way we can take up the cross that Christ has asked us to shoulder.

I urge all of you to talk about this before the situation is upon you and also sign an organ donation card. It would be an excellent gift as we celebrate the gift of Christ to the world.

Rudy Eikelboom (reikelboom@wlu.ca) is Chair of the Psychology Department at Wilfrid Laurier University, attends Waterloo CRC, and has signed his organ donor card.

Sunday is not a day for school

Will Braun

I don't know how to talk to my four-year-old about God. I tell him God is the one who makes things grow. I think I once told him God makes the wind blow. I ask if he wants to thank God for anything at bedtime. I've told him love comes from God.

Aside from this last line, which I'm fond of, I can't imagine that any of these statements mean much to him. As proof, when my wife said something the other day about her keeping our younger son, who is breastfeeding, alive, the four-year-old asked her, slightly puzzled, "Are you God?"

I could get a picture Bible and read him stories about stone tablets, a man-eating whale and a blue-eyed son of God, but I'm not honestly sure my relationship with God has benefited from countless retellings of the Jonah story.

I don't recall what I thought about God at age four, but I do recall the Sunday school years. I learned three things in the Mennonite Sunday school of my youth. First, there are fine, caring people in church. This was the most significant lesson. Unfortunately, it was not the only one.

I also learned that Christianity is trite. We were asked simplistic questions with predictable answers. This sent a negative message about the intelligence of both students and church in general.

Finally, I learned that faith is closely related to school. I learned that faith, like math or geography, is something you acquire via your intellect while sitting indoors, quietly and still, during a given time slot, while listening to an authority figure. I hated school, so the fact that the church's primary formal offering to me was called "school" was an unspeakably ill-considered piece of marketing. It was also a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of faith.

Last March, Christian leaders from around the world met in Kenya for a theological conference on children. In a statement about the event, the World Council of Churches – one of the participants – emphasized the importance of "the Sunday school movement" and the need to expand "theological curriculum from a holistic child development point of view."

Count me and my boys out. I'm glad the PhD-laden leaders are talking about kids, but "school," "theological curriculum" and "development" are from the wrong paradigm. When Jesus put a child in the midst of the disciples, he did not say, "If you impart sound theology into this child's undeveloped brain, you receive me." (If he had said that I would know what to tell my son.) Jesus said, "Whoever receives such a child in my name, receives me."

An aboriginal friend told me that children are closest to God. Parents still provide guidance and impart wisdom, but this notion turns the common assumption that children are lacking – usually intellectual knowledge – upside down.

What I want for my sons is a setting in which their own innate, heart-level oneness with God can flourish. I think this requires love and attention, exposure to natural wonder, nurture of curiosity and beautiful religious rituals. I feel my childhood had all but the latter. I would love to see our churches get better at providing this for children today.

Occasionally, our family visits an Anglican church that has a particularly beautiful communion ceremony. My son willingly comes back from the playroom for this part of the service. I like to think that when we go to the front, where he can smell incense, hear the music, see rituals and receive a blessing, his sense of the holy is nurtured in a way that a lesson could never achieve.

Will Braun (wbraun@inbox.com) is a Winnipeg writer whose work appears in various faith publications in Canada and the U.S.

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Editorials

A cost too high

Coby Veenstra

In the province of Limburg, the Netherlands, one can explore a chain of very long, dark caves that during World War I served as a field hospital. Many soldiers spent their time there writing messages, jokes, greetings, and drawing cartoons on the walls with bits of charcoal. One such drawing was particularly striking: a large cartoon with the note underneath, "All I really want to do is get home and see my mom."

Days after seeing the caves, my family and I visited a war cemetery. As we roamed around, my son gave out a yell, "Mom, look!" There was the grave of the 18-year-old boy who had drawnthe cartoon. Although the grave was then 80 years old, all of us were teary at the thought of this lonely young man who wanted only to go back to his mom. That moment was an epiphany for me, and made the men and boys whose graves dot several European countries become real. The cost of war became very painfully clear.

As World War I drew to a close that cost was not diminished. The politics involved in ending the war did not recognize the value of the lives being lost. The armistice was drawn up and ready to go weeks before it was signed, but for the sake of choosing a memorable historical date it was held off until the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month. How many lives did that cool date cost? How can we devalue lives to the point that they can be thrown away for a clever date? Poor private George Price, the last Commonwealth soldier to die two minutes before the guns were silenced, could have gone home to his family in Nova Scotia.

Private George Price is generally acknowledged to be the last Commonwealth soldier killed in World War I.

Many of this war's losses happened during the so-called Hundred Days offensive at the very end of the war, in which Canadian troops played a substantial role in a series of major attacks along the Western Front. As with the entire war, the use of automatic and chemical weapons produced a horrible death toll. And why? No good answers there.

WWII was not much different, and the waste of human life went on and on. Many people fought valiantly, civilian underground as well as the armed forces. Many lives were lost in heroic efforts to push back the Nazi force. But other lives were lost carelessly by inept leaders and poor preparation. The death toll of these two "wars to end all wars" was 65 million in WWI and 60 million in WWII (which at that time was about 2.5 percent of the world's population).

The devaluation of human life goes on even today. The attack on Afghanistan, which seems like nothing so much as a gigantic temper tantrum following the events of 9/11, left more than 10,000 Afghan *civilians* dead, just "collateral damage." The American State Department denies much of that toll. Of the destruction of one village that was cluster-bombed not once but twice, the State Department said, "Nothing happened there." Yet a large unexploded "nothing" was half buried in the destroyed village square. It seems that lives that are not on "our" side are expendable without a second thought. Soldiers from all participating countries, too, paid with their lives for this.

The invasion of Iraq, with its phantom "weapons of mass destruction," and the huge civilian and military toll in Korea and Vietnam, wars which really accomplished nothing, are other instances of waste and indifference to life. During these latter wars, some power-hungry officers threw whole battalions at hills or ridges "because it's there and I want it" or "I'm up for promotion, and this battle will give me the points I need." Countless more soldiers died retrieving the dead. The stories of the squandering of human life could fill many pages. Let it be enough to acknowledge that so many human lives *were* wasted.

Only yesterday we celebrated the birth of the Prince of Peace. He came to bring peace to our hearts and to our world. Maybe we need to listen to the message brought by angels: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests." That will go a long way toward avoidance of war.

Coby Veenstra is a retired teacher living in St. Catharines, Ontario. She can be reached at coby.j.veenstra@gmail.com.

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Arab Spring, Christian Winter?

Bert Witvoet

I was chatting with an Egyptian-Canadian couple about the turn of events in the Middle East. Being Coptic Christians, they keep close contact with developments in Egypt. The Arab Spring, which toppled Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, has also set in motion strong anti-Christian movements. The situation is fluid and worrisome. We reflected on the fact that Egypt used to be a Christian country before Arab forces swept across Egypt in 640 A.D. After the surrender, the Coptic population underwent a large-scale gradual conversion to Islam. Today Coptic Christians make up no more than 15 percent of Egypt's population.

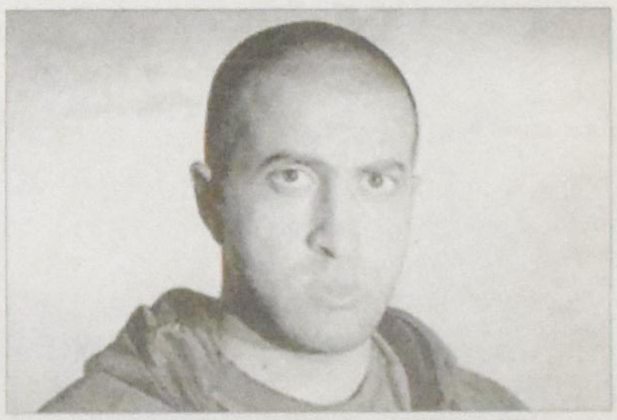
We talked about how the political situation in the Middle East has been changing. Who knows how all of this will end? The lady, whose name Ireni means "peace," said she believes that Egypt will be Christian again some day. That would be an amazing outcome. Nothing is impossible with God. Her husband, Aiman, which means "right hand," was not so sure. "The Arab Spring has become the Christian Winter," he said. He fears a growing influence of radical Islam and the establishment of Sharia Law. Who will be right?

A day later, I attended an event featuring a speech by Mosab Hassan Yousef, the young man who wrote *Son of Hamas.* I had read his book a year earlier and was struck by how clearly he spoke out against Islam. Yousef has moved from hating all non-Muslims as a Hamas youth to being someone who loves everyone unconditionally after surrendering to Jesus' commandment "Love your enemies."

Yousef made it clear that Islam is not a religion of peace, as many Muslims will proclaim. Since only three million of the 1.5 billion Muslims in the world speak Arabic, the language the Koran is written in, the others don't know what's written in their holy book. Of the three million who do speak Arabic, many of them don't find it easy to read the classic Arabic of the Koran. If Muslims only knew what's in the Koran and what kind of life Mohammed really lived, he said, they would know that Islam is not a religion of peace, but a religion of intimidation and hatred. According to the Koran and other Muslim writings, Yousef suggested, to kill an infidel is true worship. And he added that influential movements like the Muslim Brotherhood, which has 100 million members throughout the world, have a goal of building of a Muslim state on the rubble of every civilization in the world. Other smaller extremist groups like Hamas share that vision.

Looming disaster?

What I found interesting in his talk was how Mosab characterized the Arab Spring as a looming disaster for the Middle East. When political dictatorships are replaced by theocratic systems, the grip of Islam will be even stronger than it is now, he said. "Only when the revolutionaries start to protest against Allah himself, start rejoicing," he added.



Mossab Hassan Yousef, author of Son of Hamas, argues that – contrary to the claims of many Muslims worldwide – Islam is not a religion of peace.

Yousef's talk and my discussion with the Coptic couple reaffirmed my conviction that God is shaking up the whole Middle East, if not the world. What the outcome will be for Christians and Jews remains undetermined. Some Christian friends I know think that what is happening in the Middle East is a positive thing because dictatorships are replaced by democracies. But I doubt whether a democratically elected government spells freedom if the majority allows an oppressive religion to shape the laws of the country. Maybe what we are facing now is the beginning of that final shaking by God we read about in Hebrews 12:26 – "But once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens."

This is how an anonymous blog responder explains the Hebrew 12 text: "God is going to shake everything that can be shaken – science and the military, the economy and governments, entertainment and religion, philosophy and individuals – everything that is not founded upon the Rock is going down with a terrible crash; and only the Kingdom God and those who have built upon the Foundation of the Rock that never rolls, the Lord Jesus Christ, will stand in that day."

Somber thoughts at the end of the year of our Lord 2011. Of course, God can turn things around in a positive way. Maybe his right hand (Aiman) will work peace (Ireni). Whatever the outcome, we know that Jesus will prepare for those who put their trust in him a kingdom that cannot be shaken.

Bert Witvoet, who uses the services of an Egyptian doctor and an Egyptian pharmacist, lives in St. Catharines, Ontario.

Letters

Pray for insight before praying for Israel

On Oct. 27, 2011 I returned from my 49th visit to Israel since 1979. During these visits I've had the privilege to be received in Israeli homes as well as in Palestinian ones. During these visits I've listened to Orthodox Jewish points of view as well as to Zionist points of view (which seems to be the larger majority in present day Israel). On the Palestinian side I've had the privilege to meet Dr. Mitri Raheb, Senior pastor of the Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, as well as the President and other staff members of Bethlehem Bible College. I've also had the privilege to meet a number of Muslim leaders in the West Bank.

Based on my years of listening to a variety of sources in Israel and the occupied territories, I would not have the courage or the informed knowledge to write a one-sided, simplistic view of Israel and the Palestinians such as Harry Antonides put forward in "Israel caught in the clash of civilizations" (*CC* Dec. 12). Therefore, I can only conclude that Antonides must have visited Israel far more often than I, and that his personal discussions with a variety of leaders in Israel and the occupied territories have led him to the clarity and insights he puts forward.

I cannot escape the thought though, that our fellow Christians in East Jerusalem, Bethlehem and the West Bank would feel hurt and abandoned after reading Antonides's column over not being included in his request for prayers.

I find it also amazing that I read in Brent van Staalduinen's "Palestine's plea for recognition" (*CC* Nov. 28) statements such as these: "Israel will speed up its efforts to bully and evict people from long-held land." "And, worst of all, we Christians will support Israel and the mistreatment of Palestinians will carry on. It is an irrefutable truth that Israel is mistreating the Palestinians within its borders." And, "Most of all, we are absolutely mandated by scripture to stand up for the rights of Palestinians who are being mistreated in Israel."

Rather than pray for Israel right now, perhaps we should begin by praying for more insight, knowledge, compassion and willingness to listen for ourselves.

Also in the Lord's service,

John G. Klomps
Mississauga, Ont.

Harry Antonides responds:

Dear Rev. Klomps,

Thank you for writing. I share your pain for the Palestinian brothers and sisters in Christ. Permit me to respond briefly.

1. You say you have been to Israel 49 times. Most of us must rely on secondary sources. The challenge is to select trustworthy ones who understand history, language and ideology. A short list of my sources includes Bassam Madany, Zakaria Botros, the late Samuel Zwemer, Sam Solomon, Nonie Darwish, Mosab Hassan Yousef, Robert Spencer, Brigitte Gabriel, Mark Durie, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Daniel Pipes, and Bat Ye'or David Horowitz's **FrontpageMagazine.com** is excellent.

2. The Israel-Palestine conflict is not really about territory. It is about Israel's right to exist and to defend itself against Islamic supremacist teaching.

3. Koranic teachings, as applied in the Palestinian mosques, schools and all media, push the idea that Jews are sub-human ("monkeys and apes"). They are infidels who must be converted, subdued or killed.

4. The existence of Israel in the Middle East is an insult to Muslims, and Allah demands that it be eliminated. See the constitutions of Fatah, Hamas and Hezbollah. (Arafat called legitimizing Israel a crime against future generations.)

5. This worldview fuels the terrorists' belief that killing Jews – and Americans – is pleasing Allah and earning them a sure place in heaven.

6. There is widespread anti-Semitism in the West, especially in the media and at the UN. Objective news reporting about Palestine seems to be a rarity. Think of the Muhammad al-Dura hoax. (See the Palestinian Media Watch **palwatch.org** for footage direct from Palestine.)

7. The Israelis were forced to guard their border with checkpoints and a large wall. This is saving lives but making life more difficult for Palestinians to travel.

8. Real peace will not come to that part of the world until Muslims have a change of heart. Until that happens, Israel must have the right to defend itself.

Poem hits home

I loved John Terpstra's poem "The Little Towns of Bethlehem" (*CC* Dec. 12), and did a double take when he mentioned Hogg's Hollow. How many *CC* readers know that many (like dozens!) of *CC* readers live near Hogg's Hollow? Just a thought, or maybe a quiz. Great issue as usual.

Jack Van Meggelen
Willowdale, Ont. (near Hogg's Hollow)

Christian education and political engagement

Yes, Christian education does make a difference ("Do Christian schools make a difference," *CC* Oct. 24), but we would do well to pause and reflect on what it does besides breeding a next generation of faithful followers filled with goodwill and eager to practice charity.

To a great extent Christian education in the home, the school and the church also desensitizes and blunts young adults to acquiring political acumen. Their upbringing does not give them a clue how to respond to the overwhelming social, cultural and economic problems that currently plague our world and threaten to disintegrate societies. We editorialize a lot, we preach a lot, we teach a lot, but we do not lead. We promote cocooning.

When political discourse pops up, it usually harks back and regurgitates the glorious times of a Kuyperian past – a typically Dutch notion. This passé era reinforces the safe idea that we are politically active and thus okay on that score. But this has little to do with the God given call to make our voices heard in the public square in times of severe social and economic distress, and when crimes are committed at the highest level that disrupt and distort orderly society. It is as if Christian Reformed folk by their silence defend the status quo. *Christian Courier* permits the printing of Islamophobic opinions by a frequent contributor. It belittles the courageous stance of protesters on Wall Street ("Occupy Politics," *CC* Nov. 14) while articulate and penetrating voices such as Chris Hedges, Noam Chomsky, Robert Scheer, Supreme Court Judge Jed Rakoff and other prominent thinkers who support the OWS movement remain unsung heroes.

Many pensive graduates of Christian schools rebel against that gaping hole in their social education. They pack up and leave the fold believing that the church is irrelevant. We are poorly equipped to respond to their genuine needs. They become "Christians in exile," an appropriate phrase coined by John Shelby Spong. We are losing the best.

George Visser
Sarnia, Ont.

Christian Courier

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News

CRC: Synodical reports on the Belhar, creation care and an officebearers covenant now available

BURLINGTON, Ont. (CRCNA) – A Christian Reformed Church study committee has recently completed and submitted a report that formally asks Synod 2012 to accept the Belhar Confession as a fourth standard of faith for the CRC.

Another study committee has finished and submitted a report asking Synod 2012 to approve measures that address the issue of Creation Care. A third study committee has completed and submitted to synod a re-written version of "The Form of Subscription," the document all Christian Reformed officebearers are asked to sign.

Now available in the Synodical Services section of the CRCNA website **crcna.org/pages/synodical.cfm**, all three reports are to be taken up when Synod 2012 meets next year on the campus of Redeemer College in Ancaster, Ontario.

Before then, congregations and church councils are asked to carefully review and, if necessary, compile a response to the reports. "Councils are invited and encouraged to review and carefully study each of the reports," says synodical services director Dee Recker in a blog on The Network. "If any council wishes to respond to the reports and have that response considered by Synod 2012, they may do so by way of overture or communication to synod."

Such overtures or communications to Synod 2012 must to be processed through a church's council and then by the church's classis. Once that has happened, says Recker, the overture or communication needs to be submitted to the synodical services office no later than March 15, 2012, to be included in the printed Agenda for Synod 2012.

Arguments for the Belhar

The Belhar report asks Synod 2012 to adopt the Belhar Confession as a fourth confession because, among other reasons, it is important "for the CRC to formally state its commitment to, and to live out, the biblical principles of unity, reconciliation and justice."

The report argues, "Adopting the Belhar Confession is an important witness to the membership of the CRC that together we stand firm on matters that are rooted in scriptural teaching and flow from the heart of God."

The Belhar Confession arose out of, and was written by, South African church members in response to the circumstances surrounding the sanctioning of apartheid, the official South African policy that called for separation of the races.

Synod 2012 is also asked to encourage churches to incorporate the themes of the Belhar Confession into their outreach and liturgical ministries as ways of "living out the Belhar Confession's themes and embracing its values."

Guiding our response to 'creation care'

As for Creation Care, Synod 2012 is being asked "to declare that both Scripture and continually emerging scientific knowledge are necessary and valid ways of knowing that should guide our response to creation stewardship issues, including climate change."

The report provides a climate change primer, detailing historic trends and what it says are the latest research on the issue. But a caveat is offered: "The science of climate change is complex and has been the subject of extensive investigation, discussion and debate, particularly over the past three decades.

It is impossible to do full justice to the extent of this subject in a few pages; the intent here is to provide an overview of the principal scientific issues. For each issue, multiple scientific papers could be cited, but here references are provided to a few seminal papers, reports and books that are intended for a more general audience."

In the report, Synod 2012 is being asked to call upon the churches, church members and denominational bodies "to be voices for justice and public examples in the effort to live sustainably within our God-given resources, to promote stewardship in our own communities and our nations and to seek justice for the poor and vulnerable among us and for future generations."

A 'covenant' for officebearers

The third report recently made available is what is called a "Covenant for Officebearers in the Christian Reformed Church (2012)." It has been for many years known as "The Form of Subscription."

In the document, officebearers "affirm three creeds – the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed – as ecumenical expressions of the Christian faith." Office-bearers are asked to affirm the confessions of the CRC since they "continue to define the way we understand scripture, direct the way we live in response to the gospel and locate us within the larger body of Christ."

In addition, office-bearers are asked to affirm the witness of "Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony" as a current Reformed expression of the Christian faith that forms and guides believers in the present context.

Office-bearers also will be asked to "promise to present or receive confessional difficulties in a spirit of love and fellowship with our brothers and sisters as together we seek a fuller understanding of the gospel. Should we come to believe that a teaching in the confessional documents is irreconcilable with God's Word, we will communicate our views to the church."

North Korea furious at South's Christmas lights

SEOUL, South Korea (NOR) – North Korea warned South Korea of "unexpected consequences" if it lit up a Christmas tree-shaped tower near their tense border just before Christmas. So far, those consequences have not been evident.

The North's state-run Uriminjokkiri website said the Christmas lights – visible on both sides of the border – would amount to a form of "psychological warfare." Pyongyang has previously accused Seoul of using the tree to spread the Christian message to people inside the atheist state.

Seoul's annual tradition of lighting up a Christmas tree tower was suspended in 2003 following a warming of ties between South and North Korea. However, relations have deteriorated again since then, and the South lit its Christmas-tree tower last year. The Associated Press quoted a defence ministry official as saying the South agreed to allow Christian groups to light a further two towers this year.

The official said the towers are located in the western, central and eastern parts of the border. Security will be tight during the 15 days they are lit, beginning on Dec. 23. (As of *CC* press time, the lighting had not yet occurred but South Korea had not canceled its plans to do so.)

The tree-shaped, 30m-high steel structure on Aegibong hill, about three kilometres from the border, was illuminated by thousands of small light bulbs last year. The display could be seen from the North's major city of Kaesong across the border, according to media reports.

Relations between the two Koreas have been tense for months. South Korea blames North Korea for sinking one of its warships in March 2010 with the loss of 46 lives, a charge Pyongyang denies. Tensions were further strained in November 2010 when North Korea shelled a South Korean border island, killing four people.

New society to translate Kuyper's works

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. (CRCNA) – Scholars from Calvin Theological Seminary, Calvin College and Kuyper College, all in Grand Rapids, Michigan, have helped form a new organization whose focus will be to translate and promote books, articles and other materials written by Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper.

Kuyper (1837-1920) was an influential figure in the history of the Netherlands and modern Protestant thought. He founded a political party and a university, and served as the prime minister of the Netherlands from 1901-1905. In his writings Kuyper worked to develop a Reformed theology for the general public, arguing that God's creation is good and emphasizing Christian involvement and service in all fields of human activity.

Called the Abraham Kuyper Translation Society, the new organization includes scholars from across North America and abroad. Also deeply involved in formation of the society is the Acton Institute, a Christian research, educational and outreach organization in Grand Rapids.

Several of the participating scholars recently met at Calvin Seminary to discuss and form the society. The group is in the process of identifying other scholars who have an interest in Kuyper.

Major influence on Kuyper scholarship

"The society promises to be a major influence on English-language Kuyper scholarship as well as having a huge impact on the next generation of Christian leaders who desire to engage culture," says Melvin Flikkema, provost of Kuyper College. Kuyper College has agreed to administer the work of the society.

"Many decisions will have to be made over the years dealing with selections to be made, whether translations should cover the complete text or be in paraphrase form, or whether only certain sections or chapters should be included," Fikkema continued.

To help launch the new society, the Christian's Library Press released copies of its new book *Wisdom & Wonder: Common Grace in Science & Art*, a freshly-translated, newly-produced collection of newspaper pieces written by Kuyper. The book launch occurred on Dec. 10 at Calvin Seminary.

The publication of *Wisdom & Wonder* represents the first published English-language selection from a broader project to publish a complete translation of Abraham Kuyper's three-volume, 1700-page work on common grace. Volume one of *Common Grace* is scheduled to appear in Fall 2012.

Meanwhile, an annotated bibliography of Abraham Kuyper has recently become available through translation and editing spearheaded by Princeton Theological Seminary. In addition, several new books on Kuyper are or will soon be available. These include Calvin College historian James Bratt's biography of Kuyper and Fuller Theological Seminary President Richard Mouw's book on Kuyper's main ideas.

News

Wycliffe translating the Bible in high risk areas

ORLANDO, Florida (CNF) – Wycliffe Associates, an international organization that involves people in the acceleration of Bible translation efforts, reports that national Bible translators are risking their lives as they carry out their work in some of the most volatile, hostile regions of the world.

To protect the identities of Christians who are living and working in these sensitive countries, Wycliffe Associates calls this region New Frontiers and has established a Scriptures for New Frontiers Fund to support national Bible translation teams that are living and working in high-risk areas. The fund helps provide the necessary resources for Bible translation to continue in these volatile regions.

"These areas are perhaps the most hostile environments for Bible translation in history," says Bruce Smith, president and CEO of Wycliffe Associates. "Our mission is not an easy one. But it is absolutely critical."

Dangerous to follow Christ

In one country only two percent of the population is Christian, and these believers suffer brutal persecution driven by hostile majority religions. Homes and churches are raided, Christians are arrested and beaten and new converts are ostracized by their own families and neighbors.

Two young men, barely out of their teens, were brutally attacked in the village where they lived. They had been working in a nearby city when they heard the Gospel from a local pastor and converted to Christianity. When they returned home, a gang surrounded them and demanded they deny their new faith. When they refused, the mob beat them severely. After the authorities learned of the incident, they arrested the victims, who remain in prison.

A pastor who lives in one of the most anti-Christian regions of the world was beaten by drunken fanatics in his own home for refusing to sacrifice a chicken in the temple of their deity. Undeterred, the pastor has established a small, growing group of Christians who are eager to learn more about God.

"Most people in regions like this around the world are living in abject poverty with no religious freedom and no economic opportunity," says Smith. "With my own eyes, I have seen people who are hungry for truth, but who have no way of knowing it."

Millions still don't have the Bible

Local Christians are asking to be trained for the work of Bible translation. In one area, a special institute has been established to train evangelists for mission work and has graduated and released 16 students into the mission field.

Three different language groups in one New Frontiers nation will have the Gospel of Luke in their own language by the end of 2011. These people have been without any Scripture in their languages.

And one group reports that eight families from one village walk a little over 30 miles each week to attend church services. "Millions have not even a single Scripture, a simple promise or a life-changing command from God in their own language," says Smith.

Wycliffe Associates involves people in accelerating the work of Bible translation through their time, talents and treasure, says Smith. Because millions of people around the world are still waiting to read the Scriptures in "the language of their heart," Wycliffe Associates is working as quickly as they can to translate every verse of the Bible into every tongue to change every heart, Smith says.

Wycliffe partners with nationals, mother tongue translators, staff, volunteers and supporters to direct and fund these efforts, as well as to provide logistics, networking and technical support. Through a growing global network, Wycliffe Associates is striving to overcome local limitations of time and resources to achieve the goal of beginning the translation of God's Word in every remaining language that needs it by 2025.

In 2010, the organization mobilized 4,381 volunteer and staff members to accelerate Bible translation in some 59 countries.

Additional information is at **wycliffassociates.org**.

Study: Online evangelism is producing real disciples for Christ

CAMPBELL, Calif. (TCP) – Over half of those who "made a decision for Jesus over the Internet" have subsequently shared their faith with others, a new survey by Global Media Outreach has revealed.

Additionally, 34 percent read their Bibles daily and nearly half pray for at least 10 minutes a day.

"These findings are remarkable because they reveal that online evangelism isn't just an in-the-moment decision, and people continue to grow in their faith after they have indicated a decision," Global Media Outreach founder and chairman Walt Wilson said in a statement.

The study, called the Christian Growth Index, measured the responses of more than 100,000 people from around the world. For Wilson, the results of the study indicate "that online evangelism and discipleship is truly measurable and effective." Fifty-one percent of those surveyed said they shared their faith three times or more after their conversion which was initiated online, and 37 percent said they shared their faith at least once or twice.

Global Media Outreach is a global ministry that presents the Gospel online through websites such as **WhoisJesus-Really.com** and **GrowinginChrist.com**. There are more than 5,500 trained online missionaries worldwide who respond to questions asked by seekers through emails.

The Silicon Valley, California-based ministry stresses not only evangelism but discipleship as well. GMO expanded its discipleship offerings last year. In 2010 alone more than 15 million people said they became committed to Christ via a Christian evangelism or discipleship website.

Rabbi, Pope discuss Europe's moral crisis

ROME (CWN) – After a meeting with Pope Benedict XVI earlier this month, Britain's Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks spoke at length with Vatican Radio about the need for Jews and Christians to work together in restoring Europe's moral sense.

"We are very concerned obviously with the soul of Europe," said Rabbi Sacks. "Europe was built on Judeo-Christian foundations. Even the market was built on Judeo-Christian foundations." Sacks is chief rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregation of the Commonwealth and has been the spiritual leader of the mainstream Orthodox Jewish communities in the UK, Australia and Hong Kong since 1991.

The British rabbi believes that religious faith can affect modern society, not by authority but by moral suasion. Sacks asserted, "I think faith in the modern world – and I wouldn't have it any other way – has no power at all. But it does have a great deal of influence. Now politics is about power. So politicians and religious figures inhabit different universes, although many politicians have strong religious faith, but it is difficult to know exactly how do you create a partnership between the two, which is one reason I came to see the Pope, because I think if Jewish and Christian voices are heard, along parallel lines, then they should not underestimate the influence they have."

Sacks called his meeting with the Pope "a very moving encounter." He said, "I think we felt that something had happened at the moment and it was, you know, a sharing of faith across the boundaries and it was very moving. The Pope at the time told me he wanted to deepen that relationship so I felt this visit was a way of moving that a step further."

Russia: Orthodox Church calls for calm in aftermath of national election

MOSCOW (AsiaNews) – After a wave of demonstrations throughout Russia on Dec. 10 denouncing alleged electoral fraud and against the ruling party United Russia, the Russian Orthodox Church has urged its members and other Russians not to get into a "civil war."

The white balloons, flowers and coloured ribbons that filled Balotnaja Square in Moscow were part of the largest demonstrations of the Putin era. They were seen by Putin's central government as a possible sign of a dreaded "colour revolution" along the lines of the one in Ukraine in 2004 which led to the annulment of the presidential election.

The Orthodox Church expressed its concerns this way: "We cannot but express satisfaction with the fact that the demonstrations in all Russian cities were peaceful and within the law," said Arch-priest Vsevolod Chaplin Head of Department for Relations Between the Church and Society at the Patriarchate of Moscow, "but the most important thing now is to maintain civil peace and not allow new . . . social unrest. Quoted by Interfax, Chaplin later admitted that "serious questions were raised, which are inconvenient for the authorities, who we hope will respond in an adequate and honest manner."

The protest movement turned out to be nonviolent. Protesters demanded another vote, the removal of the head of the Central Election Commission and the release of fellow protesters who had been arrested. "Russia without Putin," "Russia without corruption," "Free elections," shouted the people in the square.

"We have a constitutional right to transparent elections," said a man named Kirill, a 30-year-old protester. "We do not want to overthrow any power, but only go to the polls convinced that our vote is worth something."

If their demands were ignored the opposition planned a major new demonstration on Christmas Eve. From the Moscow stage a letter was read from blogger Alexei Navalny, who was arrested and sentenced to 15 days detention for having "resisted police" and having urged Russians to "break free from the chains."

After initial indifference and total censorship on public television, the Kremlin was forced to face the protest. President Dmitry Medvedev ordered investigations into allegations of fraud on Dec. 4, which gave United Russia victors a slim majority.

Experts say a new middleclass is emerging, made up of educated young people, small businesspeople, professionals and intellectuals. Within 10 years, they will represent 60 percent of the national population and yet are without any political representation.

In the aftermath of enthusiasm for the "revival of Russian civil society," as some media have called the protests, the question of who can lead and form this emerging sector of society is already being asked.

Columns

Flowers and Thistles

Curt Gesch

Witness by house and garden

December: the month we get our first seed catalogues for summer's gardens. As I write we have a foot or more of snow and it was -12 C last night. Not exactly Arctic air, but not gardening weather either. I've paged through the first catalogue and started folding over page corners.

Meanwhile I do what gardening I can. This means putting a blanket of mixed bedding and chicken manure on the top of my last compost pile.

But I plan. I'm pretty sure where the potatoes have to go. One part of the experimental plot will get forage beets again; the cattle love them, and now I know which of the three varieties I tried will do best. I'll put broccoli in the area in which I had grown a legume (sainfoin) for soil enrichment. I need to start new strawberries this spring and I'm unsure whether to buy new plants or to try out someone else's runners.

For certain I'll want to grow purple kale again . . . in the flowerbeds.

John and Betty's house

My friends, let's just call them John and Betty (their real names), did the planning for their new house with care. You can see by the picture that it is a beautiful house: clean lines, lots of light, lots of wood. They planned carefully according to their convictions. They wanted to use local materials whenever possible and in their area of British Columbia that means wood. The post and beam structure uses beams of Douglas fir taken from near Babine Lake, the closest source.

Much of the rest of the house uses lodgepole pine. This is the species that has been decimated by the mountain pine beetle. After the beetle bores, a fungus invades the wood and leaves a bluish stain. The wood, considered marred by some, is lauded by others as "denim wood." All the pine in John and Betty's house is made of this local resource.

The cabinets are not just any cabinets, but cabinets produced by a local uber-craftsman, Roland Oberlader, a Canadian who learned his trade in Austria. (Roland lives in Quick, B.C.)

When John, a Christian school principal, began the serious woodwork, he hired a student as a summer helper, thus providing money for the student plus valuable training. Lifting the beams required a small crane, which John and Betty rented from a local logging contractor who has machinery available during off-time in the forest.

All in all, it is a beautiful house, an ethically-conceived house, and – if you should be so fortunate as to visit – a haven of hospitality. You might even get some honey from the hives John and Betty keep in the back yard, or wine they make from local currants, crab-apples, and saskatoon berries.

Front yard gardening

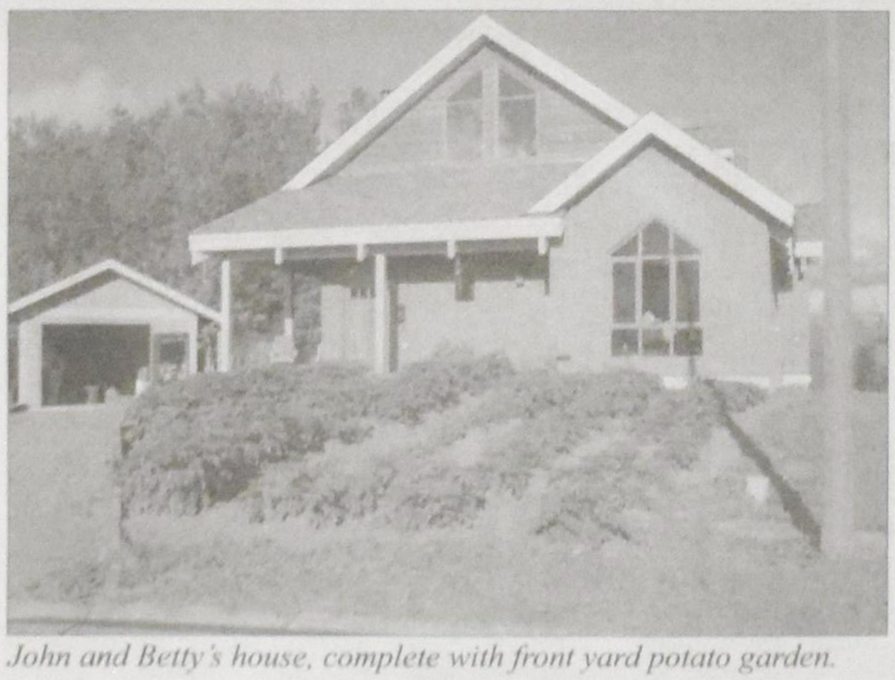
While the house was beautiful, the front yard was left with packed clay and crossed on board paths: utilitarian and ugly. Something needed to be done. And so John and Betty planted a garden. By last August you could see a front yard covered with healthy potato vines.

Even in a small town where gardens are still the norm rather than the exception, people would stop and stare. Actually, people seem to go out of their way to go up the cul-de-sac to stare. John comments: "Betty and I are always amazed about the people who do drive-bys. I do wish they would stop and come in. It gives us an excuse to drop our hammers, our rakes and our other tools and take a break."

Front yard gardens are not all that new. Before I could find Edmonton on a map, I heard from Albertan classmates at Trinity Christian College in the U.S.A. about the large population of Ukrainians in Edmonton. "They plant potatoes and cabbages in their front yards for a few years to get the soil in shape to plant a lawn," was the explanation I heard. I expect those Ukrainian-Canadians planted the front yards for other reasons. Perhaps because landscaping in their homeland had different patterns than the small front "garden" – a bit of grass and some perennials – that English-Canadians inherited. Or because they ate lots of potatoes and cabbage rolls. Or simply because they had good sense.

During World War II, citizens of the U.S.A. were encouraged to grow vegetables instead of grass in the front yard, between sidewalk and curb, wherever they had space. These were called Victory Gardens, and having a Victory Garden was a sign of patriotism.

Wouldn't it be lovely if people would stop in at John and Betty's to ask about the garden, ask about the house: why they built it, why they live the way they do?



John and Betty's house, complete with front yard potato garden.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if Christians all over North America would plant Neighbour Gardens in their front yards instead of lawns, and dedicate the food produced there to a local food bank or soup kitchen? And wouldn't it be a great witness if people drove around our subdivisions, villages and churches *gawking* at all the vegetable gardens?

Better still, wouldn't it be a great witness if Christians were known by their front yards? If gardens became the icon by which Christians were known? If food-for-the-hungry was a visible part of Christian lifestyle? If neighbours would come to know Christians by their gardens, and their love.

We have a good example in John and Betty's home and yard. What's stopping the rest of us from looking at seed catalogues and plotting a witness while we plan our gardens?

Curt Gesch (curtgesch@hotmail.com) is a retired teacher living in Quick, B.C., only 24 short minutes from John and Betty's place.

Patchwork Words

Melissa Kuipers

Redefining family during the holidays

A friend of mine in her late twenties told me how a well-intending aunt sent her Christmas card to her parents' place, even though my friend had moved to a different city six or seven years earlier. Her younger (married) sister got her card sent to her house. The next year my friend made sure to send out Christmas cards of her own from her not-so-new address.

Another friend heard an announcement at a church he was visiting about an upcoming Christmas fund-raising dinner, which would have seemed a welcome opportunity to meet others in the church were it not for the way the pastor promoted the event: "You can buy tickets just as a couple, but we want to fill up our tables, so try to get a few other couples together and buy a table." How were single people supposed to fill up their tables?

These sorts of oversights can be uncomfortable or even painful for people who are frequently made mindful of their singleness around this time of year. Let's not trust the media to create a kindly impression of singles in the holidays: popular romantic comedies like *While You Were Sleeping*, *Love Actually*, *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *The Holiday* create pictures of isolated singles braving the holiday season and finally finding their salvation from loneliness in "the One." Songs such as "Walking in a Winter Wonderland," "Let it Snow" and "Baby, It's Cold Outside" draw a close connection between romance and the holiday.

Christmas-themed romantic comedies such as Love Actually *portray lonely singles finding love during the holidays.*

How did a celebration based on the humble birth of a peasant Saviour turn into a time for romance? I guess it's the beauty of the season, the tradition of snuggling up with a cup of cocoa around a Yule log. It's a time to share with loved ones, and that's wonderful, except that it can be difficult for singles to avoid buying into the feeling that there is something wrong with a person who is alone for the holidays.

I'm not saying we should detach romance from the holiday. I guess my concern is that, first of all, Christians very easily get swept into the materialism of the season, which advertising works to associate primarily with family and relationship building. Secondly, sometimes we associate Christmas strictly with family and relationships, forgetting the reality that for many people the Christmas season can feel a bit isolating or remind them of lost loved ones.

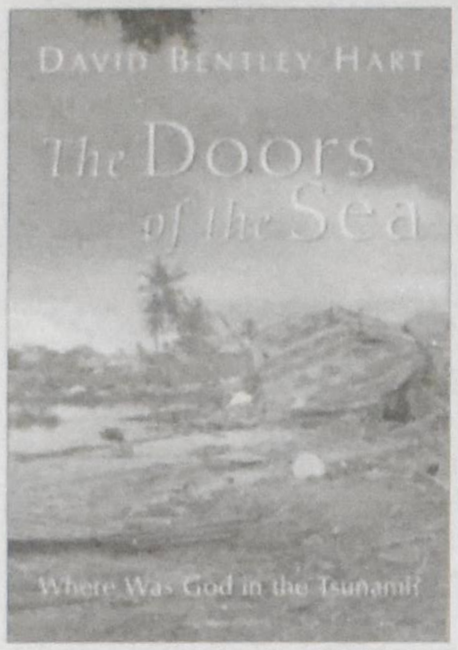
All of this stems from a larger problem: the pressure churches feel to market themselves toward families. I've visited a number of churches that emphasize a variety of children's, couples and family ministries but pay little attention to other demographics. I don't have space here to raise concerns with the ways in which our churches often seem to adapt forms of advertising and marketing used in the larger culture. Unfortunately, it seems we often create target audiences for our congregations and therefore attract a certain demographic at the expense of others. We fail to create a sense of church family that emphasizes the importance of relationships between members in all stages of life. At the very heart of mission is hospitality, the sense of welcoming all sorts of people. If churches are primarily targeting nuclear families, they are making certain people within the church feel out of place and missing opportunities to reach out to a diverse group of people outside the church.

In Mark 3:31, Jesus redefines family entirely. After hearing that his family had arrived, he asks, "Who are my mother and brothers?" In a radical gesture, Jesus claims that the nuclear family is secondary to the family of God. "Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother." Jesus reworks the way he speaks, the way he prioritizes his time and the way he demonstrates his love, around this broader definition. Later in Galatians 3:26-28, Paul writes, "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.... There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Intimacy between people who are vastly different from one another is essential to the body of Christ. Church is a place where our differences should no longer draw us apart, and where we are redefined in community.

As we celebrate the birth of Christ during a time of year so focused around family, we are called to extend our understanding of family. As we recognize our aloneness as singles, our loss as grievers, our joy as siblings, parents and children, let us celebrate the unity that comes in the family of God through love and hospitality to people who may be in different stages of life but are still one with us.

Melissa Kuipers (mckuip@gmail.com) is completing a Masters in Creative Writing at the University of Toronto.

Reviews



The Doors of the Sea: Where was God in the Tsunami?
By David Bentley Hart
Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005

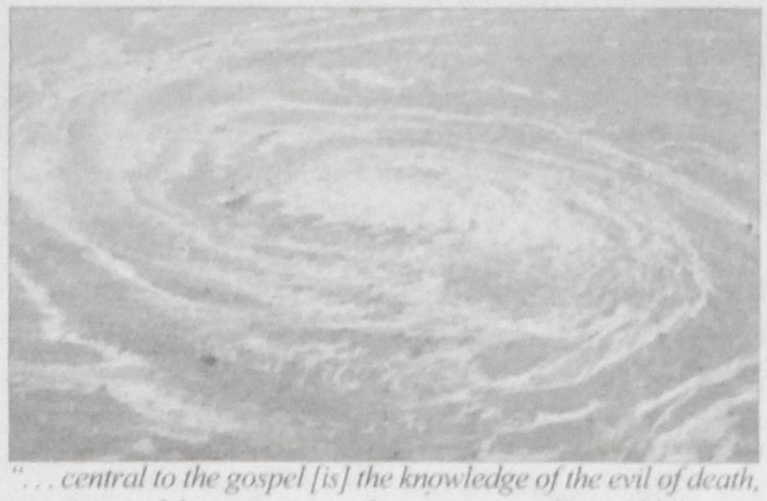
The Author of evil? God and the Tsunami

Spencer Boersma

I have been quite surprised just how many members of our Calvinist family argue these days that God causes evil. I know one lady, whose husband walked away from her quite tragically. After a time of despair, she came to the conclusion that God had caused this – had literally done this evil to her, making her husband leave her, and that this was all "in his plan." For her, it was simply the most logical and comforting conclusion. When the Tsunami occurred in Japan back in 2004, while many atheists saw this event as a classic proof of God's non-existence, one prominent Reformed-Baptist pastor quickly responded to the event offering his explanation, which was that God sovereignly caused this evil (and all evil for that matter) for his glory. Needless to say, I found these statements equally as troubling. Is there another way of understanding the love and power of God and the suffering of the world that does not implicate God as the cause of evil?

As I was thinking about this issue, I came across a book written by Greek Orthodox theologian, David Bentley Hart. Writing with sophistication and eloquence from a tradition of Christianity far older than our own, he responds to both atheist and the misinformed believer. To the atheist, he points out that at best tragic events disprove the god of philosophy, not the Christian God. Moreover, only a Christian can see a more primal innocence and dignity to creation, and thus, truly have moral indignation against the fallen state of affairs, while longing for the world that did not originally have evil, suffering and death. While the atheist would seek a better world, the only way for these values and hopes to have any reality is to protest the current reality by looking to the hope of the resurrection: "Easter should make rebels of us all."

To the unorthodox believer (that being a double entendre), he says God does use evil against its own purposes, humiliating Satan, *but* God by his providence does not *cause* evil (Satan and corrupted creation are agents existing against God's will right now) nor does his goodness *need* evil for his love and glory to be shown. God reveals his goodness *despite* evil. Rather than construct a theodicy (which are reasons for why God allows evil in his good character), Hart remarks that at the core of the Christian longing is the rejection of any reason why the innocent should suffer or why God should not intervene: senseless, inexplicable suffering must be honored as such, both for the sufferer's sake and God's. For God, there is no necessity or ultimate meaning to evil.


". . . central to the gospel [is] the knowledge of the evil of death, its intrinsic falsity, its unjust dominion over the world."

Because of this the Psalmist does not submissively dismiss the suffering of his life as "all in God's plan," but rather wrestles in mourning and faith to the point of expressing utter outrage against God's aloofness, invoking God to do more than waiting and trusting (Psalm 88-89, especially). This outrage was even supremely expressed on the cross as the sinless one died a godforsaken death as one rejected by the law. But also the tragedy of the cross is definitively answered in the victory of the resurrection against the power of evil, judging its power false in light of God's (answered) promises.

Hart powerfully writes, ". . . central to the gospel [is] the knowledge of the evil of death, its intrinsic falsity, its unjust dominion over the world, its ultimate nullity; the knowledge that God is not pleased or nourished by our deaths, that he is not the secret architect of evil, that he is the conqueror of hell, that he has condemned all these things by the power of the cross; the knowledge that God is life and light and infinite love, and that the path that leads through nature and history to his Kingdom does not simply follow the contours of either nature or history, or obey the logic immanent to them, but is opened to us by way of the natural and historical absurdity – or outrage – of the empty tomb."

Hart writes a simple, beautiful, challenging and faithful response to one of the perennial problems of faith, "How can an all-powerful and perfectly loving God permit innocent suffering and evil?" It is a response well worth reading.

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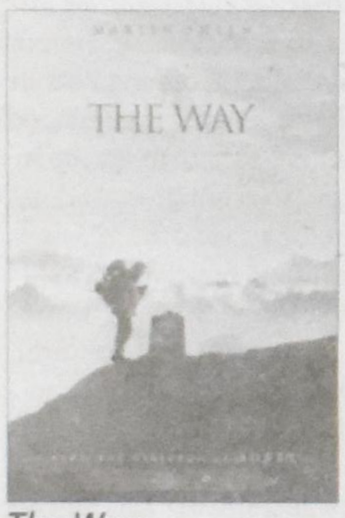


The Way
written and directed
by Emilio Estavez
Filmax Entertainment, 2010

Learning from a sacred pilgrimage

Walter Miedema

The Way follows the Journey of Tom, a doctor whose son has recently died on El Camino de Santiago de Compostella. The Camino, as it is known, is the third most significant pilgrimage route in Christianity after Jerusalem and Rome.

The Camino has four routes in France and one central route through northern Spain known as the Camino Frances, which ends at the cathedral shrine of St. James in Compostella.

Martin Sheen stars as Tom, who, as the movie opens, has no plans to walk the Camino. He takes a rather dim view of the announcement of his son Daniel (played by Sheen's real life son, Emilio Estevez, who also directed and wrote the film), that he is going to quit his job and explore the world, beginning with the Spanish portion of the Camino.

Not long after Daniel leaves to begin his pilgrimage, Tom receives a call from the French police informing him that Daniel had died after getting lost in the Pyrenees on his first night. Tom must now go to France to retrieve his son's body.

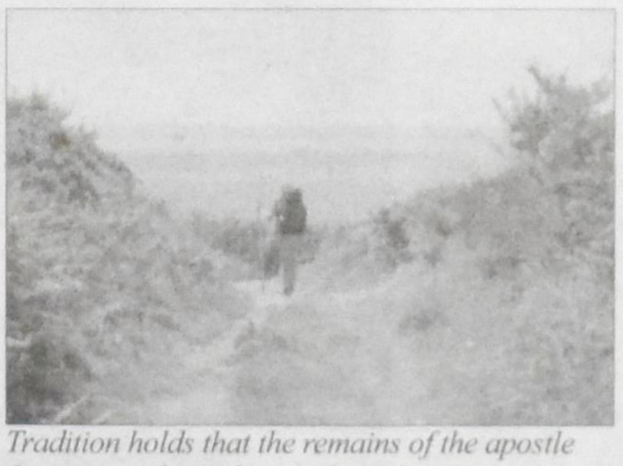
While in St. Pied de Port – a traditional starting point of the pilgrimage – Tom learns about the Camino's significance and decides to have Daniel's remains cremated and walk the pilgrimage in his honour. He also meets Joost (Yorick van Wageningen), an overweight Dutchman, who claims to be doing the Camino to lose weight. The two men start out on their journey together, and the contrast between them becomes one of the major sources of humour in the film.

Along the way they meet Sarah (Debora Kara Unger), a world-weary Canadian who claims to be on pilgrimage to quit smoking despite lighting up whenever she gets the chance. Later the trio discovers Jack (James Nesbitt), an Irish author struggling with writer's block. Despite the fact that he is attempting to write a book about the Camino, he refuses to enter any of the Churches they come across. This foursome encounters most of the major milestones of the Camino together, as well as some awkwardly humorous ones.

Despite this being a film set on a religious pilgrimage, one of its most refreshing aspects is that there is no overbearing sense of piety present to most of the experiences in the film. The characters involved are also refreshingly human and flawed. Joost offers marijuana and sleeping pills to others who cannot sleep. Sarah smokes regularly when the group takes a rests, and others swear in frustration. Even Tom, who is undertaking the pilgrimage for the most serious of reasons, ends up humbled by his actions.

Along with the imperfection of the players involved, there is a number of occasions where the pilgrims discuss what it means to be a "true pilgrim" How much of a purist must one be? Do you use a GPS? Can you use your credit card? Do you stay in a five-star hotel? How seriously does one take the journey? Is a pilgrim consciously self-absorbed throughout the journey or do they allow themselves to be changed in a more passive way?

Through most of the journey, Tom keeps his reason for walking secret. Only slowly do his travelling companions realize as he deposits portions of his son's ashes along the way.


Tradition holds that the remains of the apostle James were buried in northern Spain.

One of the most poignant portions of the film is when Tom's pack, with his son's ashes are stolen by a gypsy boy. The fallout from this incident leads to a powerful connection that crosses lines of prejudice, and leads Tom toward a destination he was not expecting.

Beyond the story, the landscapes that form the background of this film are truly beautiful. Many sunsets, open fields, and old stone churches are portrayed and the weather is used well to contribute to the mood of key scenes.

By the end of the film the pilgrims go their separate ways but barriers have been broken down. We learn more about their true motivations for walking the Camino, though some reasons are less explicit than others.

Like other Camino experiences I have read, and hope to experience myself one day, it seems Tom's journey has been characterized more by who he travelled with than where his destination was. This is heightened by the moments, where in his mind's eye, he sees his son, Daniel, in the midst of the journey's action.

There is nothing groundbreaking about this film. It is uplifting, at times thought-provoking and asks the viewer to reflect on their own lives as pilgrimage. At the same time, it does not have an overtly Christian message. It's definitely worth seeing, just don't expect it to anyone's attitude towards Christian faith.

Walter Miedema (walter.p.miedema@gmail.com) lives and writes in Vancouver, B.C.

Features

Intergeneration

Harry Van Belle

There is increasing concern in our churches that some or many of our young people in their twenties are giving up on the church. Some see proof that this is happening in the spotty attendance record of this age group in the Sunday morning worship service. Many older people are puzzled as to why this is happening: "We chucked the organ, brought in drums, sing more contemporary songs than ever before and still they don't come."

This lack of understanding about young people's church attendance may be part of a larger disconnect between the younger and the older generations of the church. To put it in the words of one parent, "Trying to understand our twenty-something son or daughter is much like immigrating to a strange country. We neither know our children's language, nor their customs."

It is not as if the generations are at odds with one another. For the most part parents and children get along just fine. There just seems to be little dialogue happening about life's most fundamental issues between the generations. The best we can come up with, it seems, is a peaceful co-existence between these two solitudes.

Younger and older people populate the same planet, belong to the same society, live in each other's homes or neighbourhoods and are members of the same church. Moreover, both of them are repeatedly calling for better intergenerational communication and relatedness as well. How are they to go about doing that? I spent the better part of the last several years researching this question and here are some of my observations.

Young people are different

There are in fact considerable differences between older and younger people today, differences in experience, in behaviour and in outlook on life that may affect communication between them. How pronounced are these differences and how can the generations learn to communicate better with one another across these differences?

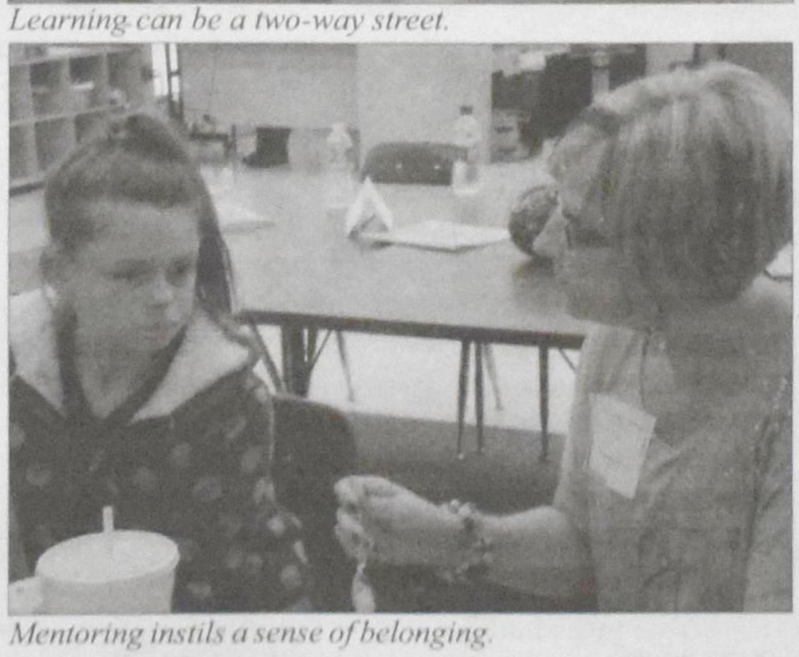
Younger and older people are not the same. That is, of course, true at any time in history. Young people are learning what older people already know and that makes them different. But the differences between the generations today are more pronounced, go deeper and, while they are age-related, they may also be more permanent. I don't think we are sufficiently aware of this.

I will mention only a few of the more obvious differences I have come to notice among younger people. The first is that today's twenty-something young people live in a world that is much more complex than when I was in my twenties. As a consequence of this, they take about a decade longer to settle into a conventional committed adult lifestyle. In the meantime they are said to be *emerging* into adulthood. They spend a longer time in school because they need more education to get a job, and they settle down into marriage, start a family and begin a life vocation about a decade later than their parents did.

But there are many other differences. Because they were born and grew up embedded in information technology, they are more invested and proficient in this medium than their parents. They tend to be future-oriented and value innovation. They are collaborative rather than competitive in their relationships, pluralistic rather than single-minded in their outlook on life and have a tinkering, let's-see-what-happens attitude toward the world. They surf the net rather than read books, they scroll, skim and scan for information, they multitask and they range widely rather than focus their attention. They value diversity, dialogue, tolerance, interaction and inclusion and favour personal expression in public over privacy. They tend to be relationship rather than task-oriented. They are given to virtual rather than face-to-face communication, spend much of their time social networking (texting, tweeting, blogging) their peers and send and read only instantaneous, interactive and brief messages (TL; DR: Too long; Didn't read) over their mobile phones. They value personal authenticity and relational transparency in interaction with other emerging adults, and they appear to have an innate distrust of established institutions and persons in power.

Perhaps the most fundamental way in which these young people differ from older folk is that their lives are largely characterized by what someone called "the integrity of questioning rather than the certainty of knowing." Theirs is a probing generation. They view testing things out as an authentic place to stand. They like to live on the edge, to try new things, to walk in a space of not knowing, and to believe something tentatively for the time being to see where it leads them. They are receptive to otherness, welcoming of diversity, open to dialogue and willing to be taught. They believe that all points of view are inevitably subject to revision and doubt that there are many prefabricated truths worthy to live by.

Learning can be a two-way street.



Mentoring instils a sense of belonging.

By way of contrast, their parents have a stake in maintaining that some things are true no matter what. They feel uncomfortable with so much openness and uncertainty. It has taken them years to craft a credible way of living of their own and they feel that their lifestyle is currently under attack. They secretly want their children to adopt their values and lifestyle and to accept their worldview, but they see very little evidence that this is happening. It is troubling for many parents to watch their children's lives go in a direction that is quite different from their own. However, it appears that most parents keep these worries to themselves and that they generally give their children a great deal of latitude in shaping their own destiny.

As for the way today's emerging adults view their parents, they may disagree with elements in their lifestyle, but most of them see no need to openly voice their criticisms.

It is said that today the lifestyles of the younger and the older generations differ so widely that they might as well be living in different worlds.

Communication across generational differences

So, what does it take to bring these two worlds into a more relevant contact with one another? I think it requires a change in attitude. We need to realize that there is more than one kind of normal in the world, and to accept that people can legitimately differ from one another. Applied to the generations, this entails the mutual recognition and acceptance by each generation that the experience and outlook on life of the other, while different from one's own, is valid and needs to be respected. The generations need the support of each other's difference. A church of only younger people or only older people is not a good church.

Mentoring and reverse mentoring relationships and communities

In my experience the best way to promote intergenerational communication in the church is through mentoring relationships. In such relationships an older person cultivates a close friendship relationship with a younger member of the church to the mutual benefit of both. In such relationships both learn from one another and both are changed by the other.

When enough of these relationships have been established, a church takes on the character of what Daloz-Parks calls a *mentoring community*. Mentoring communities encourage young people to grow up with foresight and vision. In an ongoing authentic dialogue with them, older adults in these communities recognize and honour the strengths of these emerging adults, but also challenge them to face their problems. Mentoring communities give emerging adults practical support and a place to belong. Most of all, they are meant to anchor the promise of their future by providing them with an inspiration for the long haul. Mentoring communities offer emerging adults security for the time being and a viable hope and vision for the years to come.

Mentoring relationships and communities envelop emerging adults into a network of belonging, in which they feel safe to wrestle with the big questions of life and in which they feel free to explore worthy dreams about their future. In such relationships and communities they can also practice the skills they need to function as contributing adults in society.

Relationships in mentoring communities should include some aspects of reverse mentoring in which older adults are mentored by emerging adults, too. Given the fact that we live in an age of rapid social, technological and cultural change, young people are often more aware of the direction in which the world is going than their parents or teachers. Young people also have things they can teach older people, for example, the future of information technology. All this argues for the proposition that mentorship should be augmented by reverse mentorship. So, the relationship between the older and the younger generations should be interactive, mutually supportive and mutually influencing. In short, it should be one of ongoing reciprocal renegotiation about the future shape of the church.

Churches as communities of practice

There are many more suggestions that could be mentioned for improving intergenerational communication in

Mentoring

Natasha Moes

"I like talking to you – it makes me feel young again," she laughed as I walked towards my car. We had spent the better part of two hours talking over coffee, discussing the newest challenges I found myself facing. A recent break-up and change in jobs had left me with more questions than I knew what to do with and I placed a high value on the time that one of my mentors was willing to spend helping me process what was going on in my life.

It wasn't the first time in my teenage and early adult years that I had asked older women in my life to come alongside me in this way. In these stages of my life that have been full of excitement and anxiety in choices, relationships and discoveries, there have certainly been many times where I have benefited from conversations with my mentors – older, more mature people who have intentionally come alongside me to challenge and listen, offering encouragement and some questions that help me to dig more deeply into who I am.

Lynn Southward at GEMS.

What is a mentor?

Simply put, a mentor is a trusted and influential counselor or supporter. More specifically, a mentor can be described as someone who takes an intentional role in another's life (their mentee), offering challenging questions, encouragement, prayer and accountability. Biblically, we read the teaching Paul gave to Titus, instructing the older women to train the younger women (Titus 2:4) and can view the relationship between Paul and Timothy or Paul and Titus as examples of mentoring.

Barb Van Giessen, of Kitchener, Ontario, describes a mentor as someone "who walks beside you as you journey. They see potential in you and want to see you fulfill the purpose God has for you." Van Giessen knows the value of mentoring, having been both a mentor and a mentee for many years. She says, "Being mentored has made such a huge impact on me. My mentors have helped me be more honest, see myself as God sees me, challenged me to grow, called the best out of me, pushed me to live differently, listened to me, loved me and never let me just get by." She adds, "The mentee also has to be willing to be mentored. So I have to ask my mentor to hold me accountable, to be honest with what I am dealing with – good, bad and ugly."

Mentoring in Christian ministry

Within Christian ministry, there is a growing trend towards mentoring as a form of discipleship and encouraging growth. Van Giessen is the Mentor Participant Coordinator with the Eastern Canada Leadership Development Network (ECLDN), a ministry of Christian Reformed Home Missions which is a "church-based, mentor-driven, adult learning environment for lay leaders wanting to grow their leadership capacity for further service in the church."

Participants (mentees) are paired with a mentor of their choice and meet with them once or twice a month to discuss three areas of growth: knowledge, skill and character. Van Giessen describes how the mentoring relationships are essential to build on the material taught within the ECLDN program, saying, "the knowledge and skills need to be used in order to become a part of their lives – having a mentor asking what they learned and how they are using it helps that more than anything we can do as staff." She adds, "We introduce resources and teaching on character formation issues, but it is the one-on-one conversations with the mentors that can take that information and turn it into change. The questions they ask, the accountability they give, the support they offer cannot be done in a large group setting."

Many summer camps have used mentoring to train staff members as they work. Mike Finnie has spent eight summers on staff with Muskoka Woods Christian Sports Resort in Rosseau, Ontario. Currently, he serves as Resort Staff Development Coach, overseeing ministry for seasonal staff. He describes how every staff member at Muskoka Woods is discipled by a one-on-one mentor, meeting for an hour per week to check in and ensure that staff are cared for and that nobody falls through the cracks.

Having been part of the one-on-one program as both a mentee and a mentor, Finnie explains how being mentored allowed him to "benefit from the support, wisdom and experience of older Christian men." He says, "Having men in my life that can ask me challenging questions has proved invaluable to my personal, professional and spiritual development. The questions can be as simple as how I'm doing on a personal or emotional level, how I'm doing spiritually, what my goals are for a given season, how my relationships with friends and family are, and what God is teaching me."

The questions that are discussed between a mentor and mentee can cover a wide range of topics and often change over time. In some mentoring relationships, it works well to have a set structure and a few consistent questions that are asked every time. In others, a mentor and mentee feel more comfortable allowing conversation to happen casually without any predetermined direction. Some mentoring partnerships are focused on specific changes that the mentee desires to make and regular conversations may focus on accountability. For others, mentoring meetings can be an intentional time to check in and talk through challenges and changes that they are currently facing.

When asked how she sees mentoring impacting other areas of ministry within the church, Van Giessen highlights the effectiveness of using intentional mentoring relationships to train new deacons and elders, as well as intergenerational mentoring seen in programs like GEMS (for girls in grades 1-8), Cadets (for boys in grades 1-8) and youth groups. These ministries allow for mentoring relationships to develop between people of a wide range of ages, giving children and teens the chance to be supported by people who may be as old as their parents or even grandparents and are able to offer a friendship and objectivity that they might not experience elsewhere.

Lynn Southward, a retired teacher from Mississauga, has been mentoring girls through the GEMS program for 15 years and believes that intergenerational mentoring has a significant impact on even the youngest girls. "By spending time with them each week and building a relationship of trust," she says, "they begin to ask profound and formative questions about God, pain and faith. It really is a privilege to be in a position to speak into their lives."

As part of a generation known for often being fairly self-assured and resistant to instruction and advice, I have found that being mentored not only provides me with questions to challenge me, but also a necessary reminder that I don't know all the answers. Within a Christian ministry context, mentoring relationships allow us to understand that in order to grow into the faithful disciples Christ calls us to be, we need each other. As the church, it is vital that we put a high priority on developing deep and trusting relationships between people of all ages so that we can all grow, as iron sharpens iron (Prov. 27:17).

How to take part in mentoring

If you feel that you could benefit from a mentoring relationship, there are several places to start. An obvious way is to pray about people in your life who may be willing to come alongside you in this way and approach them and request that they consider mentoring you. Alternatively, it may make sense to talk to someone you trust and who knows you well and ask if they know of someone who might be willing to take that role in your life. Additionally, formal learning programs such as ECLDN or ministries within your congregation may offer structured mentoring partnerships.

Perhaps, as you've thought back on your own journey and can remember people who were significant mentors to you, you feel challenged to take that type of role in the lives of other people younger than yourself. You could have an incredible impact on a young person by approaching them and offering to be their mentor. Or, you could begin building relationships through a weekly program for younger people within a local congregation, such as GEMS, Cadets, or youth ministries.

No matter what stage of life you find yourself in, being mentored and serving as a mentor are opportunities to be the hands and feet of Christ through developing deep and meaningful relationships. Whether you talk over Starbucks, spend time in each other's homes, or meet online via Skype, mentoring makes a difference and is a valuable practice to individuals and for the benefit of congregations.

Natasha Moes is a recent B.Sc. graduate from the University of Waterloo. She blogs about crafts, coffee and social justice at ***natashagoes.wordpress.com.*** *She lives in Oakville, Ontario.*

Intergeneration

...continued from p. 10

the church. But I want to close with one more all-important suggestion: no amount of talking with young people will by itself promote intergeneration unless we are willing to include twenty-something young people in the running of the church, either in a leadership, or in an apprenticeship role. My long-standing motto about the youth of the church is: "Don't do anything for the young people. Give them something to do!"

Three of the most informative books about intergenerational communication in the church I have found are:

Bowen, J.P. 2010 *Growing Up Christian: why young people stay in church, leave church and (sometimes) come back to church.* Vancouver, B.C.: Regent College Publishing.

Creps, E.G. 2008 *Reverse Mentoring: How Young Leaders Can Transform the Church and Why We Should Let Them.* San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass.

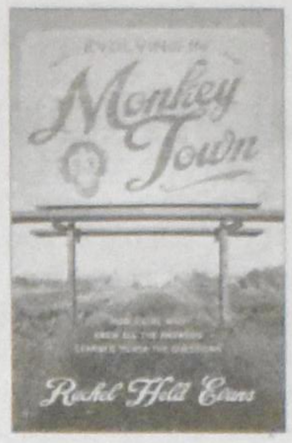
Daloz-Parks, S. 2000 *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Harry Van Belle (harryvanbelle@hotmail.com) is emeritus professor of psychology at The King's University College.

Features

blog: (n) short for weblog, a website containing an online journal with reflections, comments and links.
Christian Courier gives you a glimpse into current Christian thinking by presenting excerpts from a variety of interesting blogs. Blogs are usually free-association, occasional, off-the-cuff and may not conform to the standards of print publication.

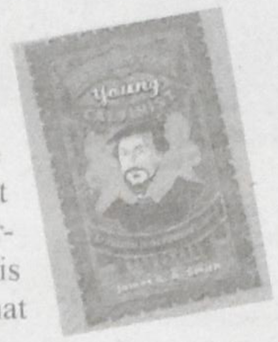
Rachel Held Evans is an author from Dayton, Tennessee, home of the famous Scopes Monkey Trial of 1925. Her first book is called *Evolving in Monkey Town*. Rachel's blog has a lively following online. Her evaluation of Reformed theology sparked energetic debate! I'm looking forward to reading her upcoming book on biblical womanhood. *Christian Courier* thanks Rachel for permission to share these posts with you. Check out her blog for yourself at **rachelheldevans.com**. – Cathy Smith, features editor.



Letter to a Young Calvinist (from a young Arminian)

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I hope this letter finds you growing in love and chasing after Jesus, brimming with all the questions, ideas, and passions that make young people like us a force to be reckoned with in the Church.



I've been reading with interest the many books, articles, and blog posts dissecting what has been called "The New Calvinism" – a movement so prevalent in conservative evangelicalism that TIME magazine called it "one of the 10 ideas changing the world." Leaders like Mark Driscoll, John Piper, and Al Mohler insist this movement is fueled by young adults like you who are rediscovering Reformed Theology and sharing it with their friends. In fact it is James K.A. Smith's popular book, *Letters to a Young Calvinist*, that inspired this letter of my own.

There is much that I appreciate about the Reformed tradition – its emphasis on the undeserved grace of God, its commitment to the authority of Scripture, its appreciation of art, literature, and philosophy. I value these things as well, and have learned much from Calvinists about how to better articulate and nurture them.

My reasons for not embracing Calvinism are of course varied and complex and too detailed to fit into this letter. At the center of my Arminianism is the conviction that nothing is beyond the reach of God's love, that God does not create hopeless people or hopeless situations. I believe that God can be in control without controlling and that he desires a relationship with his creation that involves some degree of freedom. I feel that Scripture, reason, experience, and intuition support these conclusions, but I realize there's a chance I am wrong. In fact, I've yet to be convinced that we can't *both* be right on some things!

I'm not really interested in convincing young Calvinists not to be Calvinists. If you believe Reformed Theology represents the most faithful interpretation of Scripture, then by all means, study it and celebrate it. Raise your family in that tradition and teach others about it. Be the best Calvinist you can be.

But please be kind.

For whatever reason, there seems to be a tendency in some Calvinist circles to use theology as a weapon. Smith writes, *"Now is as good a time as any to warn you about one of the foremost temptations that accompanies Reformed theology: pride. And the worst kind of pride: religious pride (one of Screwtape's letters speaks quite eloquently about this). This is an infection that often quickly contaminates those who discover the Reformed tradition, and it can be deadly: a kind of West Nile virus."*

Now let me say right away that I have met some truly wonderful Calvinists through the years who showed no signs of such pride and who exhibited only gentleness, compassion, and warmth. To say that all Calvinists…(or all Arminians)…are this way or that is unfair and irresponsible.

But I think it's important for me to honestly tell you that my experience with Calvinism has left me so bruised and wounded that simply writing this letter triggered a fresh wave of tears. Having spoken publicly about my theological views, I should of course expect disagreements and corrections, but time and again the criticisms from Calvinists have gotten deeply, painfully personal.

It was a Calvinist who questioned whether I would be a fit mother as an Arminian, a Calvinist who called me a "cotton-candy Christian," a Calvinist who publically humiliated a family member for disagreeing with her pastor, a Calvinist who suggested that my theological positions were the result of sin in my life, a Calvinist who said I would never live up to my writing potential until I embraced Reformed Theology. I have been the subject of gossip at churches I don't even attend, and at times my views have been so grossly misrepresented I'm not entirely sure how the rumors even started. My commitment to Scripture has been questioned because of my interpretation of it, my love for Jesus because of subtle differences in my views of his atonement.

In turn, I've grown defensive and fearful. I've made assumptions and started rumors of my own. I am guilty of dismissing a person as soon as I learn that he or she is a Calvinist, and (as you may have noticed) I tend to employ a generous amount of sarcasm when I write blog posts about Mark Driscoll. I criticize Calvinists for lacking compassion when I have left room in my heart for everyone except them. **I write them off for writing me off, and the vicious cycle continues.**

It's all rather ugly and sad.

I share this with you not to pick a fight but to plead for a truce. As a new generation preparing to tackle the age-old debate about predestination and free will, our positions don't have to change but our attitudes can. We can criticize one another's interpretations of the Bible without assuming motive. We can point out the inconsistencies in certain faith traditions without attacking the people in them. We can talk about our disagreements knowing that what we have in common far outweighs our differences, for together we can affirm that Christ has died, Christ has risen, and Christ will come again!

We are the future of the Church and we have an opportunity here to change the tone.

For me this means forgiving the Calvinists who have wronged me, resisting the temptation to paint with a broad brush, listening better, and loving more. For you it may mean associating with Christians of various theological persuasions and honoring their commitment to Jesus Christ over their commitment to Augustine, Calvin, Wesley, Yoder, or Wright. For all of us, it means doing what we can to live in peace with one another so that we might make the prayer of Jesus a reality—"that they may be brought to complete unity."

We don't have to agree to be unified. We don't have to think exactly alike to be of the same mind. We don't have to share a systematic theology to follow Jesus together.

So *semper reformanda!* Let's keep reforming! Let's do a better job than any previous generation in keeping the debate lively while loving one another.

With sincerity and goodwill,

Rachel E.

A Year of Biblical Womanhood

On October 1, 2010, I committed one year of my life to following all of the Bible's instructions for women as literally as possible – from the Old Testament to the New Testament, from Genesis to Revelation, from the Levitical purity codes to the letters of Paul.

This meant, among other things, submitting to my husband (Colossians 3:18), growing out my hair (1 Corinthians 11:15), making my own clothes, (Proverbs 31:22), learning how to cook (Titus 2:3-5), praising my husband at the city gate (Proverbs 31:23), covering my head when in prayer (1 Corinthians 11:5), calling Dan "master" (1 Peter 3:5-6), caring for the poor (Proverbs 31:25), nurturing a gentle and quiet spirit (1 Peter 3:4), abstaining from gossip (Proverbs 20:19), and camping out in the front yard for the duration of my period (Leviticus 15:19-33).

The project brought me to Amish country in Pennsylvania, to a Benedictine monastery in Alabama, and to rural villages in Bolivia. I found myself making Thanksgiving dinner for eight, caring for a Baby-Think-It-Over, serving homemade matzah toffee at Passover, wrestling with some troubling passages of Scripture, perching on my rooftop, and sitting silently among the Quakers.

Each month I focused on a different virtue celebrated in the Bible: gentleness, domesticity, obedience, valor, beauty, modesty, purity, fertility, submission, charity, silence and faith. Some practices I observed just once. Others I observed all year. Throughout the experiment, the Biblical Woman's Ten Commandments served as a guide for daily living.

In addition to my own experiences, I interviewed modern-day women incorporating ancient practices into their own lives – a polygamist, an Orthodox Jew, an Amish family, a Quiverfull mom, and more. I've spent hours conducting research, combing through feminist, complementarian, and egalitarian commentaries, and actively seeking out Jewish, Catholic and Protestant perspectives on each issue. And of course I've read the Bible, cover to cover, isolating and examining every verse I can find about mothers, daughters, sisters, wives, widows, queens, and prophetesses.

My purpose in embarking on this project is not to belittle or make fun of the Bible, nor is it to glorify its patriarchal elements. It is simply to start a conversation about how we interpret and apply the Bible to our lives. In the end, I hope my misadventures inspire women to cut themselves and one another some slack…because the truth is, we all do a little "picking and choosing" when it comes to biblical womanhood!

(A book about the project will be published by Thomas Nelson in 2012, but you can keep up with my progress here on the blog as I post updates, photos, reflections, and videos.)

Columns

From the 11th Province

Marian Van Til

The 12 days of Christmas

The secular Christmas season has gotten longer and longer. The number of shopping days before the "Holiday" – the mark of the season for many people – has increased year by year. In the U.S. this year some stores chucked the concept of Thanksgiving Day as a sacrosanct family day in favour of being open for business. Clearly they couldn't wait until four or six a.m. on "Black Friday" for the mad rush of shoppers looking for Christmas-gift bargains. Perhaps those merchants figured that the family that shops together stays together.

In the church, for centuries the days of Christmas have been (and still are) *after* Christmas – the 12 days from the Feast of the Nativity through Epiphany. (Epiphany should be of great import to us because it marks the gift of our own salvation: the coming of the Gospel to us Gentiles.) In the Reformed tradition we've pretty much ignored those 12 days. After December 25 we tend to put away the Christmas stuff, including the carols, and get on with life in winter. That's too bad.

I propose a small antidote. Though the date of this *CC* issue is Dec. 26, in keeping with the church year I'm going to take one more look here at the significance of the Incarnation.

This year's common lectionary readings for the Feast of the Nativity are Isaiah 52:7-10, Psalm 98, Hebrews 1:1-12 and John 1:1-14. (You may want to look those up before you continue reading here.)

"Burst into songs of joy together … for the LORD has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem," the prophet Isaiah proclaims. Isaiah and the Old Testament Israelites looked *forward* to redemption but God has now spoken to us through his Son – "whom he appointed heir of all things and through whom he made the universe," Hebrews tells us.

We must not let our celebration of the babe in the manger – or our preoccupation with family, food and gifts (or the aftermath of same) – obscure the truth that that infant wearing our human form is also the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, "the radiance of God's glory," the "exact representation of God's being" and the Word who was with God and was God from the beginning.

That reality is immense; the mystery is mindboggling. I haven't the words to describe it. I'll let one of my favourite poets, John Donne (c.1572-1631), speak instead. Two linking sonnets portray the paradox of God-as-man in wonderfully meaning and image laden language that bears careful, joyful reading.

We must not let our celebration of the babe in the manger … obscure the truth that that infant wearing our human form is also the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, "the radiance of God's glory."

Annunication

Salvation to all that will is nigh;
That All, which always is all everywhere,
Which cannot sin, and yet all sins must bear,
Which cannot die, yet cannot choose but die,
Lo, faithful virgin, yields Himself to lie
In prison, in thy womb; and though He there
Can take no sin, nor thou give, yet He will wear,
Taken from thence, flesh, which death's force may try.
Ere by the spheres time was created, thou
Wast in His mind, who is thy Son and Brother;
Whom thou conceivst, conceived; yea thou art now
Thy Maker's maker, and thy Father's mother;
Thou hast light in dark, and shutst in little room,
Immensity cloistered in thy dear womb.

Nativity

Immensity cloistered in thy dear womb,
Now leaves His well-belov'd imprisonment,
There He hath made Himself to His intent
Weak enough, now into the world to come;
But O, for thee, for Him, hath the inn no room?
Yet lay Him in this stall, and from the Orient,
Stars and wise men will travel to prevent
The effect of Herod's jealous general doom.
Seest thou, my soul, with thy faith's eyes, how He
Which fills all place, yet none holds Him, doth lie?
Was not His pity towards thee wondrous high,
That would have need to be pitied by thee?
Kiss Him, and with Him into Egypt go,
With His kind mother, who partakes thy woe.

Donne realized that as significant as Christ's birth is to us, it doesn't, and can't, stand alone. In "The Showing Forth of Christ" he writes:

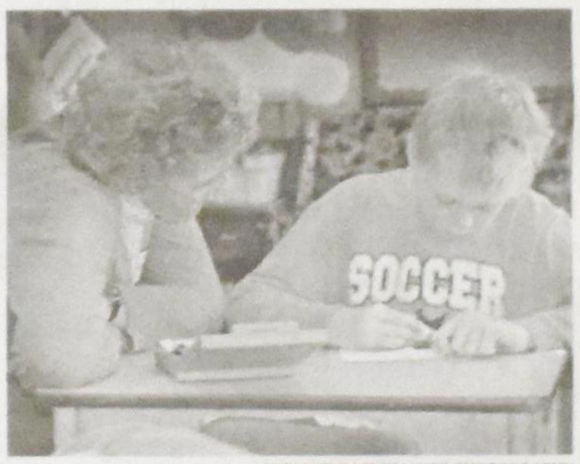
The whole life of Christ was a continual Passion; others die martyrs but Christ was born a martyr.
He found a Golgotha, where he was crucified, even in Bethlehem, where he was born;
for to his tenderness then the straws were almost as sharp as the thorns after,
and the manger as uneasy at first as the cross at last.
His birth and his death were but one continual act,
and his Christmas day and his Good Friday are but the evening and morning of the same day.
And as even his birth is his death, so every action and passage that manifests Christ to us is his birth,
for Epiphany is manifestation.
Every manifestation of Christ to the world, to the Church, to a particular soul is an Epiphany,
a Christmas day.

A blessed 12 days of Christmas to you all.

Marian Van Til (mvantil@roadrunner.com) is a former CC editor living in Youngstown, NY.

Artful Eye

Dream of the school



SHELLEY KORVEMAKER PHOTOGRAPHY

Late, in the dead space of the night
after midnight, I heard a door click
shut behind me. I stood in the groove of a room,

its walls tight against my shoulders.
On the walls, shelves; on the shelves, books.
They stretched as far as I could see.

Then, two others. From the first I caught
the sickle cut of sweat. The other seemed,
in that gloom, to stand in a glimmer of starch.

"Wat moet jij hier? Do you know where you are?"
His voice seemed hoarse, as from the dust of ploughing.
"Nosce te ipsum," I said. "I know where I am."

"Then why these tears?" "I've sold my life for books,"
I said. "There are too many of them,
too little wisdom for the time I've spent."

Then the other, oma, took my elbow
and shook me. "We gave our money
to build this place," she said. *"Kom aan."*

Then on the wall of books I seemed
to see all those our burning cities
have sent to trudge the highways, age on age,

saw Cordelia heal the ruined king.
"Do you know what you are doing," said my guide,
"when you tell our stories? You are making

the wordless dead live out their fears again
within the long permission of God's hope."
Then on the wall, the brand of an exact number,

and an image folding to a pattern
unimaginable except by number,
like a galaxy hinging on nothing.

"Do you know what you are doing?
You reach for the stop of time itself
inside the envelope of God's intentions."

"But to what end?" I said. I felt fear, as before.
But she reached and shook me, as before.
"You cannot know," she said, "what your words
will weigh with students remembering them
in a place you will never see.
You work in the bewilderment of time.

The harrow kicks the stone away
and in a hundred years the hill is changed.
Therefore have faith, hope to do good,

love the work and its woven pattern:
read, talk, listen, cook, lay brick, sweep
the mat when it is drenched with snow,

wash the beaker, run the errand, pray
for the healing of what you cannot heal."
Then the walls in the night fell away

and I was alone. My eyes met wind,
and the dawn in fog, buildings in trees,
and on the bright plain of the campus,

people walking, from dark to light to dark
to light, under the trees, in the open.

Lionel Basney

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Photo: *Shelley Korvemaker is a photographer living in Wyoming, Ont. She attends Wyoming CRC*

Columns

Everyday Christian

Cathy Smith

Serving by sitting

Maybe this has happened to you. You have to go to a meeting. You don't really feel like it.

One Thursday night last month we had our fall congregational meeting. I didn't feel like going at all. It was our first cold night, the kind of November dusk when inky blackness suddenly spills from the sky, cloaking the houses across the street by 5:30 p.m. It was the kind of gloom that signals your inner grizzly bear to lumber to the nearest den. We'd had an early supper, the dishes were done, blue and orange flames were capering in the woodstove. It was a perfect night to stay home, enjoy a cup of coffee, curl up on the loveseat and watch the hockey game with my husband. I'd already been out on Tuesday night for catechism and choir practice, and would have to go out again the next night for another event.

But, you guessed it, I went. I stared down my grumpy grizzly, touched up my makeup, re-fluffed my hair and left my husband to cheer on the new and improved Leafs alone.

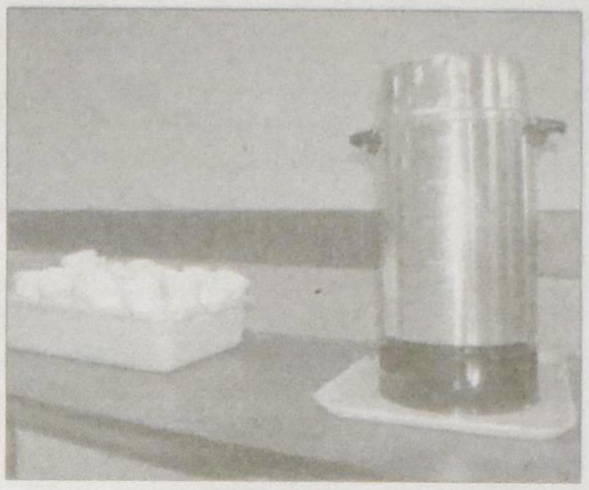
I'm glad I went. The clerk had worked hard to get all the materials prepared in advance. He'd photocopied the agendas the previous week and inserted them into the mail slots. He'd set up the sound system and powerpoint the night before. He was slated to read the minutes from the spring meeting and to present the clerk's report, so, naturally, he had spent time on those items too. And before the meeting he also had to touch base with the guest speaker and help her get wired for her presentation.

The council chairperson had prepared for the meeting, too. He's a busy guy. But he'd written out some remarks. The pianist, too, had prepared. She'd been busy that day, volunteering at the Christian school, but there she was, on this dark and windy night, ready to play, arriving with her music in hand.

The custodians had prepared. They'd set up the chairs, made coffee and baked some cookies. After the meeting, they would do the dishes, check that the lights were turned off and make sure the doors were locked. They would get home late.

Our guest speaker, Marg Smit-Vandezande, had travelled some distance to speak to us about a Counselling Assistance Program offered by Shalem. This program helps churches and other organizations provide counselling services to their members. Her talk was accompanied by a clear and helpful slide show that she'd brought along. It was good for our congregation to hear about how we might be able to offer immediate assistance to hurting individuals or families.

Our treasurer and our finance committee had prepared a preliminary budget. We voted on that. Some other people gave reports about the ongoing work and ministry of our church. My friend Olga gave an enthusiastic review of the Day of Encouragement that she'd attended in Ancaster. Several individuals stood up to share opinions and thoughts on a variety of matters. We sang three hymns together. We prayed.



I had a serious five minute talk with an elder on my way out. It was a heart-warming moment of trust discussing things close to our hearts. He's not someone I have a chance to chat with often.

All I really had to do at this meeting was sit. I simply had to provide the affirmation of bringing my body along to warm a chair. It's a humble service, offering only your presence and interest, but this, too, I think, is love.

And here's how I know that's true. After I'd grabbed my coffee and found my seat, the chairperson opened the meeting with these remarks: "Thanks for coming out tonight. It's a cold night, and maybe you felt like you'd rather stay home, but thank you very much for coming out and caring about the business of the church."

We're in this together. An old African proverb says, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." That's why I made chili for the potluck luncheon hosted by the Enfolding Committee, attended the Mission Trip planning meeting although I'm not signed up for the trip, and why I'm sitting in the pew at the second service pretty faithfully. There are a myriad of small, unsexy ways we can serve Christ and our neighbour if we have the will to do so. Here's another quote I picked up on Facebook: "The measure of a life is not its duration, but its donation." And guess what? Donation can be as easy as showing up and respecting the effort of others. It can be as simple as sitting in the circle, enlarging it just a bit.

Another year is dawning. Annie Dillard, a Pulitzer Prize-winning author, said, oh so wisely and succinctly, "How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives." May we measure our days and our years in donations. Even the smallest, like sitting at a meeting, count.

Cathy Smith (cathy@christiancourier.ca) is features editor with CC. *She lives in Wyoming, Ontario.*

God's little princess?

Marie Versteeg

I thought it was mildly funny that my three-year-old daughter, Gretchen, insisted on wearing the purple princess costume-dress from Grandma all summer. The red flags went up when she came home from daycare knowing the names of all the Disney princesses, despite never having seen a single movie or book at home.

Long before Gretchen reached this stage, I had resolved to resist princess culture. Now I am in the thick of it. I wish I could blame it all on daycare, grandparents and library books, but when I catch myself saying "Princesses don't wear skirts all the time – how about jeans today?", I recognize that I'm not helping the situation.

Early on, my husband and I tried to defuse Gretchen's princess obsession. We'd say, "It's fun to *pretend* to be a princess, isn't it?" But she saw through it and regally informed us that she was playing "*real* princess." We'd say, "Playing princess can be fun sometimes. How about we play with your doctor's kit now?" But she wasn't so interested.

In her book *Cinderella Ate My Daughter*, Peggy Orenstein suggests that girls' imaginative options have been whittled down to just one game: playing princess. The Disney Princess industry, earning four billion dollars annually, has monopolized toy store shelves. Admittedly, I have allowed a few of their 26,000 products to wiggle their way into my daughter's bedroom. But what else can I do? How can I mediate my desire to build my child's confidence (I can't be the only mom at daycare who tells my girl that she isn't a princess), while also avoiding the pitfalls of contemporary princess culture? And the pitfalls are many: according to Orenstein, the American Psychological Association has linked early childhood princess culture to teen and tween depression, eating disorders, negative body image and dangerous sexual activity.

I know many Christian parents try to mediate these dangers by telling their daughters that they are princesses of God. The Christian publishing industry helps us out with books like the *God's Little Princess Devotional Bible*, by Sheila Walsh. Such books emphasize godly virtues like kindness, faith and honesty, while reminding girls that princesses come in all shapes and sizes and that God loves them all. Phew.

The Disney Princess industry generates billions of dollars each year.

Still, the *Devotional Bible*'s introduction for parents makes me uncomfortable: "Every girl is a princess, the daughter of a King…the greatest King who created and rules over everything! Girls long to be beautiful, to be loved, to be adored … and to give their hearts to their hero. God is that hero." Do all girls naturally seek a hero, or does our society spoon-feed this idea to our girls? If so, do we really want to tell to our daughters that a good way to come to God is through the romanticised fairytale archetypes of hero and damsel? How can I tell my three-year-old that we should fold our hands, close our eyes, and *not* eat our food while praying because we want to show respect for an awesome Creator, while also encouraging her to imagine God as her own personal Prince Charming?

Am I reading too much into this princess stuff? Isn't it harmless to let girls be God's little princesses for a few years? After all, we *are* God's children, right? And that does sort of make us royalty, right?

I'm not so sure. There's a difference between the biblical imagery of God's family and that of God's kingdom. God was hesitant to allow the Israelites an earthly king. The two images don't really conflate anywhere within scripture that I can find (but please note: I am not a theologian). Is it possible that we have crowned ourselves princes and princesses in the kingdom of God when we should be paying more attention to our roles as its stewards?

But playing princess is easier than playing steward.

For now, I mumble over the part in Gretchen's children's Bible where Esther is chosen queen for her beauty and trumpet admiration when she saves her people from Haman. I try to average out the number of times I read Disney's *Cinderella* with the number of times I read *The Paper Bag Princess*, Robert Munsch's tale about a princess who doesn't really need a nice dress – or a prince. And I take hope from the fact that this morning Gretchen didn't want to wear a skirt … unless we went out somewhere. It's a start.

Marie Versteeg is a wife and a mother of two little girls. She lives in Caledonia, Ont. and works and teaches at Redeemer University College.

Columns

Our World Today

Bert Hielema

Am I a heretic?

I am always thinking. Often I muse on bible passages that puzzle me, which has given me the incentive to slowly change my focus from Scripture alone to a combination of written word and external world, a fusing of Spirit-inspired writings with God's direct revelation in creation. Not surprisingly this has led to different ideas. It all started with that famous text "God loves the world, the cosmos, so much that he offers his only begotten son as a ransom to wrest it out of the grip of the Great Deceiver." The idea of cosmos is from the Greek, and includes everything we can see, probe, think, paint, compose in music or prose or poetry, build theories upon and write philosophical treatises about.

For me that definition of cosmos and the coming of the cosmic kingdom are at the core of my quest for salvation. For that end God has given the Scriptures to provide us with "a lamp for our feet and a light for our path" (Psalm 119:105). Actually, Romans 1:20 suggests to me that even without Christ and the Bible a person might plead sufficient grounds for salvation on Judgement Day just by having seen creation as a miracle and honoured its maker. Billions have never heard true gospel preaching, and our gracious God will make allowances for that.

For me, Colossians 1:15-20 is one of the most poignant passages of Scripture because it suggests that Jesus sees himself as the first-born of the entire creation. First-born means that he was indeed the first human being and existed before anything else. He almost always calls himself "the Son of Man," humanity personified. In his very humanness, in his ultimate loving kinship with all his fellow creatures, Jesus is, simultaneously, the image of the invisible God. He makes God's love visible so that we can fully experience this love. We, women and men, are made "in his image": we physically look like Jesus, who, as God, has entered into his creation, and so affirms that God, we and the earth belong together. Forever.

For me and for his creation, Jesus has gone through death. Here too he has been the first, and so nothing in my life happens which God himself has not first experienced: pain, loneliness, sickness, deep sorrow, and even death. God, for my salvation, has deemed it necessary that in the life of the man Jesus his total fullness is present, so that we too and everything else, have been reconciled, have been set aright. In his glorified human existence, Jesus is our mediator with the Father.

That's how I read Colossians 1:15-20. I believe that we are under-selling our own dignity and worth as human beings, a typical Calvinistic trait. After all, Psalm 8 calls us "little less than a god," and Psalm 82:6 suggest that "You are gods, and all of you children of the Most High." Furthermore, since Jesus created it all, any act of harm against creation is an assault on the holiness of Jesus. I see The Lord's Prayer as an eschatological instrument, centering on The Kingdom – the New Creation – to Come. Therefore to "Forgive us our debts as we also forgive our debtors," must be seen in that light as well, asking Jesus to be merciful when we sin against God's beloved creation and harm its holiness, and asking us not to point fingers to others who do the same. I also see Revelation 22:2 this way. The statement that "The leaves of the trees are for the healing of the nations" has long been a puzzle to me. Global warming is a direct result of our machinery spewing carbon dioxide. The leaves of the trees are the healing agents there. Creation has her own mechanism for restoration, but is now overwhelmed by the immense amounts of man-made greenhouse gases. Once the carbon-based poisons are eliminated – which will be in the New Creation – the leaves of the trees will do the rest.

At Christmas we celebrate Christ's second birth: His first-birth took place 'in the beginning.' Is this comprehensive approach to the gospel really a heresy?

Bert's new books, The Shortest Day *and* Day without End, *are available by contacting Bert@hielema.ca.*

By him and for him

As the first human creature ever, God created the entire cosmos, all that lives, moves and has its being. He created this by him and for him. That explains why we, his brothers and sisters, his look-alikes, are also so immensely creative, which is evident in the works of Leonardo Da Vinci, Shakespeare, Hildegard von Bingen, Rembrandt, Bach, van Gogh, as well as such eminent scholars as Luther, Calvin, Bonhoeffer, Bavinck, Louis Pasteur, Einstein and such technical giants as Steve Jobs.

God's creativity explains the human ability to be creative, such as in this painting by Vincent van Gogh.

Words from Wild Horses

Kenny Warkentin

Advent candles

By the time you read this, Christmas will be over (the date of this issue is Dec. 26). But I'm writing during Advent season, and pondering the meaning of this time. Although I grew up seeing the candles being lit, the brief sermons or talks on the specific meaning of each candle, it wasn't until this year that I began to fully comprehend this ritual.

Having researched the meanings behind each Advent candle, I've come to see this ritual as an important step in learning about the very character of Jesus. Hope, peace or preparation, joy, love and then the Christ candle hold significant meaning to my journey of truth as it pertains to my struggle with gender. For years I struggled silently with same gender confusion, and had no hope that God would rescue me, change me, or that he was even there for me in the journey. Peace was something that remained at a distance. I saw other people "at peace" with who they were, or so it seemed, but for me, I was in turmoil and heartache. I think that until you find peace, joy will not come. So joy, the deep joy that comes from God, wasn't something that I experienced much of. I think I enjoyed moments of joy with family and friends, but it wasn't something that lasted. There wasn't a depth or maturity of joy that solidified in my life. It was more like my emotions had a yo-yo effect. I would feel good and then shame, guilt and then remorse.

To know love and to be loved was probably the most difficult of the five virtues represented by the Advent candles. I think that in order to know love in the truest form, one needs to know what it is to have hope, peace and joy, and, surprisingly, maybe to truly know these emotions and feelings one must know Christ (who is symbolized as the white candle at the centre of the arrangement). To know Christ and be known by him is by far the greatest gift I have come to have in my life. Through this relationship with him and to know that I am loved by him, regardless of how I feel or even what I think I deserve, I begin to understand that He is my hope.

As I began to see my worth in Jesus, I began to hope in him. I began to realize that even when things don't go my way, or the struggle with gender insecurity creeps in, Jesus says he is my hope and my salvation, that in him I have all that I need. I used to quote Proverbs 13:12, "Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life." For me, that verse has come to mean that when I place my hope in the wrong thing it makes my heart sick. But when I place my hope in Jesus, even when I experience tough times, eventually I will be fulfilled. In this place, I have come to know peace. That I am at peace with this man called Kenny, whom God created and imagined into being. As I place my hope in Jesus, I am at peace. I am at peace in my gender, my sexuality and my understanding that God defines me and has a purpose for me, rather than putting my hope in the cultural definition of same gender attraction. In walking in this hope and peace, this tranquil place of knowing my worth, a smile comes across my face and a deep joy resides in my heart. This joy goes beyond mere feeling to a deep knowing of gratitude for the work of Jesus in my life and sense of being.

So how can I stop from loving Jesus, or even loving myself and others? To really know love is to know Jesus, to be reminded that He was born in the ultimate of lowly places, a stable, a place where animals reside. Amongst the filth and stench of a barn, unfit for a newborn baby, he was born. His coming brings us all to the same place, and maybe to humble the rich and to validate and raise-up the poor. We are all welcome, no matter the smell or stench in our lives. I don't know what it is this year that has allowed me to see the meaning of the advent candles in a different light, but I am grateful to Jesus, who came as a baby so I could know his friendship and my worth in his eyes.

Kenny Warkentin (kennyp66@gmail.com) works full time as an urban missionary with Living Waters Canada and is an artist and musician. He lives in Winnipeg with his wife and daughter.

News

Organic chemistry, or, no man is a noble gas

I'm beginning a class this semester in organic chemistry. When I embarked upon my second university career in the sciences, I never dreamed that my life would be so enriched by the study of things like calculus, physics and chemistry. I looked on these subjects as stepping stones on my way to a new career or (often) obstacles on that path. What I encountered was an incredible new understanding of the world around me, in all its physical properties, subatomic intricacies and the mathematical formulae that relate and describe so many things around us.

In the past few days I've begun to think about carbon. The element is all around us and in us, and makes up such diverse things as our exhalations, the pencils we write with, the gas in our cars, and a much-desired shiny rock. When we talk about organic chemistry, we begin with carbon. All the organic molecules that make up living things (plants, bacteria, sloths and me) contain carbon. It is, literally, the stuff of life. It's no accident that carbon forms the backbone of organic molecules. The specific structural properties of the atom make it the ideal candidate to form the complex compounds that we're made of. Anyone who's taken a certain amount of chemistry realises that the special thing about carbon is its ability to form bonds. Of all the elements, carbon is the loneliest. Most metals form compounds by donating their electrons and hanging out in close proximity to other elements, and most other non-metals prefer to form bonds with only one or two other species. But carbon craves connections. Its bonds bring it into contact with as many as four other species at a time, and often with many others of its own kind as well.

Carbon is the stuff of life and has some lessons to teach us about our need for relationships.

You may see where I am going with this analogy, or you may wonder why on earth I'm blithering on about atoms. The simple fact is, carbon is the stuff of life because of its ability to connect with the world around it. Humanity is the same. We are uniquely designed to form connections (relationships) with people all around us. We form complex compounds (communities) that, in turn, make up larger communities, and are able to have great impact on the other people and communities around us. Some of us prefer to think of ourselves as the elements that don't need anyone except our own kind, forming little couples like the diatomic gases (think oxygen: O2). Some of us, even more futilely, think we need no one at all like the noble gases (such as helium). Perhaps John Donne should have written "no man is a noble gas entire of itself."

Carbon is the stuff of life, and while it mirrors our interconnectedness and the importance of relationships to each person, it is also another wonder of nature that points to the *nature* of its creator. God himself seeks connections and relationships, interacts with other beings, and experiences attractions and repulsions like the subatomic particles that make up his creation.

Truly the world is a wondrous place. Even when the concepts seem impossible to grasp, the complexities of an assignment insurmountable, and the burden of studying things so far outside of my comfort zone discouraging, I should remember carbon and its many bonds. Probably the best thing to do in such moments is to go at once to the help centre where a kind person is waiting to interact with me, helping me make connections between concepts as I make a connection with another human being.

To myself as much as to anyone else I repeat: No man is a noble gas entire of itself, every man is a piece of the continent.

Elisabeth M. Gesch is a student at Memorial University of Newfoundland and a pharmacy technician. She also has a B.A. in History from Calvin College. She attends St. Thomas' Anglican Church in St. John's, Newfoundland.

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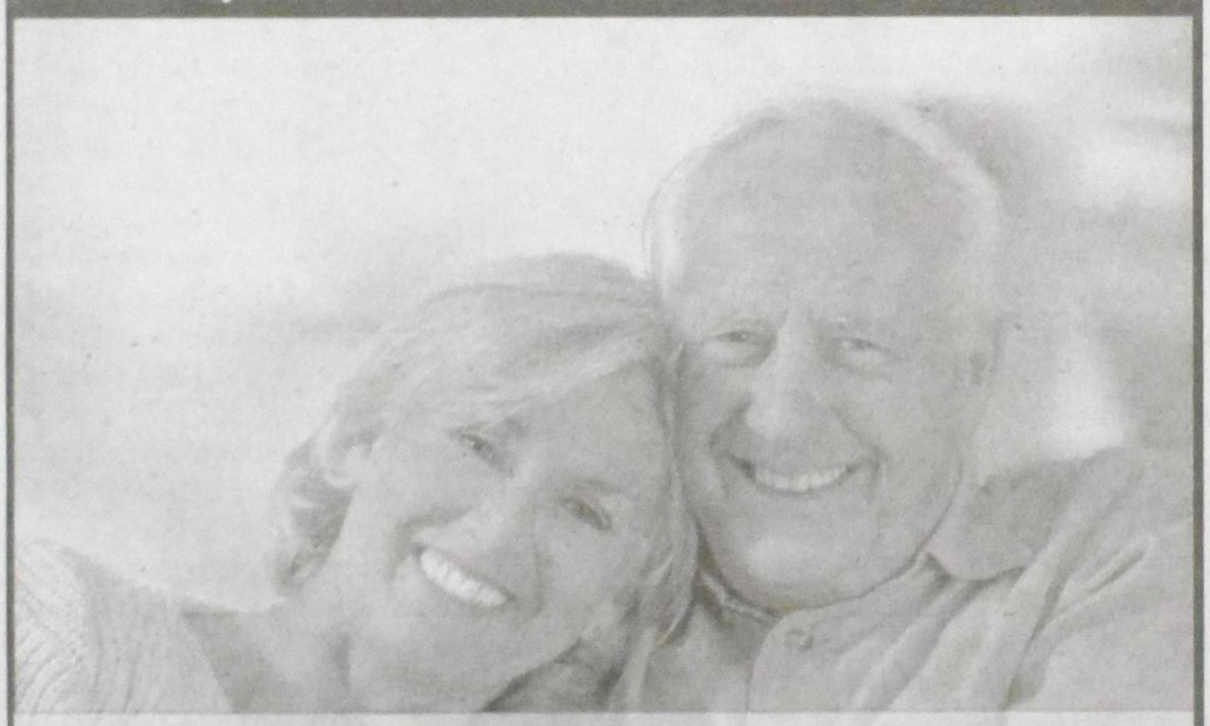
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Non-specialists looking at new science

Bob VanderVennen

In recent months some strong disputes have arisen among Christians about scientific discoveries that contradict what we say the Bible tells us about God's creation of all things.

Science tells us that the universe is about 4.5 billion years old, that living animals existed already some millions of years ago, and that human fossils have been discovered that are about 150,000 years old. And very recently, in South Africa fossils of creatures that died about two million years ago have been discovered that seem to be partly human and partly monkey. Is this evidence that humans were created that long ago by some sort of evolutionary process? How are we to think of science and the Bible? How are non-scientist and non-theologian pew-sitters to think about these professional arguments?

A key to our thinking about science and Christian faith is that we must have a solid Christian understanding of what science is. In some ways our worldview over the years may have removed God's activities in the physical world from our Christian understanding of science.

Of greatest importance is that God has revealed himself to us in two very different ways. One way is by his words, which are clearly written for us in the Bible. The other way God reveals himself is through his deeds. Both word and deed bring us knowledge of God and of his works.

The Bible tells us that God completely and constantly operates everything, which we understand as God's providence. God runs all the physical things in the world every day in regular, repeatable ways. We learn about these deeds of God through the study of the physical world, which activity we call science.

Scientists report their findings of what they discover about God's constant care for the physical world by the terms "laws of science" or "laws of nature." But we should think of them as "God's laws," otherwise we are giving a non-Christian interpretation to God's regular work in his created world. It would be better to call them "scientific laws" because this allows a Christian interpretation.

This 13th century image of God creating the world depicts him doing so using geometric and harmonic principles. Science should be understood as a study of God's regular ways of doing things in the physical world.

"Evolution" has always been a nasty and un-Christian word, but maybe we should think of "Christian evolution" as a new way of defining some of God's works. Then we Christians can accept all the things we learn about the changes in living things that God has been making over the ages, because this is what scientists have learned about this part of God's work. God has constantly run the

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1961 December 23 2011
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Ephesians 4:1b
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Marlene & Maarthen Reinders
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Chris & Catharine Berghuis
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Obituaries

On November 12 at the age of 44

Glenn Van Zeumeren

crossed over the finish line into the arms of Jesus.

His wife, Michelle (Exelby) and children, Ryan, Collette and Sierra were by his side at Princess Margaret as he slipped into glory.

Dear son of Herman and Freda Van Zeumeren
Son-in-law of Ron and Hilly Exelby

Beloved brother to:
Ben and Anita Van Zeumeren — John and Michelle Van Zeumeren
Deb and Greg Riedstra — Wayne and Christy Van Zeumeren
Beloved brother-in-law to:
Chris and Kelly Exelby — Darryl and Rochelle Exelby

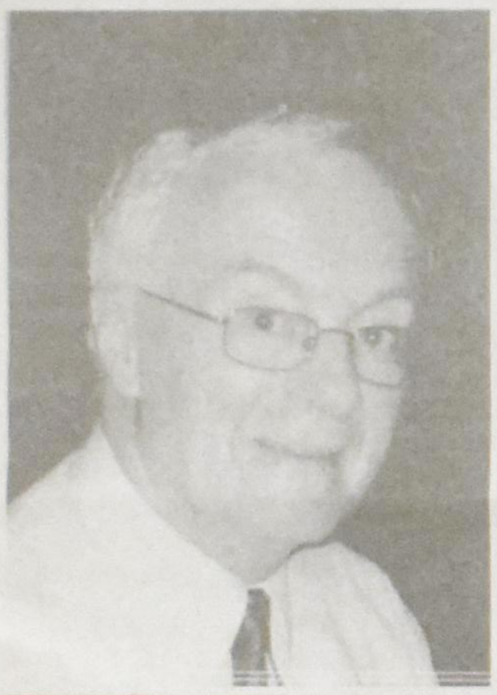
Glenn will be sadly missed by many nieces, nephews, family and friends.

His legacy will live on forever. "*So once again, let us swim, bike and run with endurance, the race that God has set out for us!*" Hebrews 12:1

Thank you to so many of you, some of you whom we have never met, for the prayers for us over the last year. We appreciate all your support and prayers.

Funeral was held at CrossPoint CRC in Brampton on Nov. 18, 2011.

Corresponding address: Michelle Van Zeumeren
9 Amity Rd, Mississauga ON L5M 1P1



Rev. John William Jongsma

September 24, 1932 – November 29, 2011

Devoted husband, father, grandfather and great-grandfather, pastor and friend to many.

Peacefully, surrounded by his loving family, John was called home to be with the Lord after a short courageous battle with cancer.

He is survived by his loving wife, Marie, daughters Elaine (Dave) and Diane (Clarence), sons David (Kim) and Philip (Nicole); grandchildren: Mia, Matan, Gilon, Tess, Jessica (Chris), Lyndsey, Jeremy, Taylor, Kirsten and Connor; great-grandchildren: Zion, Kemarley and Liam; brothers and sisters.

Dedicated minister for 50 years, John preached his last sermon on October 9, 2011. He loved to volunteer with Meals on Wheels. He had a special spot in his heart for needy children worldwide and loved to support that cause. John's compassion and acceptance of all people was unsurpassed. Even in his final days he continued to pastor to the people around him. John was grateful to the caring staff at the Juravinski Hospital who respected his wishes and comforted him and his family during his final hours.

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. Philippians 1:21

Correspondence: Marie Jongsma
Unit 212 - 1415 Upper Wellington St, Hamilton ON L9A 5E8

July 27, 1951 — November 30, 2011
Chatham, Ontario — Burnaby, British Columbia

After 60 years of being blessed to be a blessing,

Alice Laarman

a daughter of The King, passed away peacefully
and went home to be with her Lord and Saviour.

Alice grew up in Ontario, in the communities of Listowel and Aylmer. After attending Trinity Christian College, in Palos Heights, Illinois, Alice began her career as a French teacher at Fraser Valley Christian High School in Surrey, B.C. In 1988, Alice changed her focus and began teaching English in China with English Language Institute/China (E.L.I.C.). Alice had to retire from her teaching when in September, 2008 she was diagnosed with advanced lung cancer. Alice's abiding faith led her to continue to be a witness to the amazing love of Father as she lived out her last three and a half years in Burnaby, B.C.

Alice is survived by her mother: Hermanna Laarman of Aylmer, Ontario, by her siblings: Johanna Laarman (London), Herman Laarman (Aylmer), Leo & Janet (St. Marys), Jenny & Bram DeVos (Strathroy), Hilda & Doug (Oakville) and Catherine & Gerry Faubert (Dundas), as well as many aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews, great-nieces and great-nephews.
She was predeceased by her father, Gerrit Jan Laarman (1975), her niece, Martina DeVos (1980) and her great-nephew, Zachary Brisco (2007).

Correspondence:
Mrs. Hermanna Laarman, 22 – 110 Caverly Road, Aylmer ON N5H 2P4
or Irene Kraay, 7364 13th Avenue, Burnaby BC V3N 2E1

Klaas (Clarence) Dykstra

Born September 27, 1926 in Rotterdam, The Netherlands

On Wednesday November 30, 2011 the Lord called to himself our beloved husband, father, grandfather and great-grandfather in his 86th year. His life was dedicated to his Lord and Saviour by serving his family, the church and others in many ways.

Beloved husband of Sya Dykstra (nee Vanderloo) for over 58 years.
Loving father of: Peter and Linda Dykstra — Clarence and Ingrid Dykstra
Harry and Marina Dykstra — Helen and Alec Kononiuk
JoAnn and John Fekkes

Opa to 14 grandchildren and 9 great-grandchildren.

The memorial service took place at Holland Christian Homes on Dec. 3, 2011.

I lift my eyes to the mountains – where does my help come from?
My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.
Psalm 121:1, 2.

Correspondence: Sya Dykstra at sya@enscribe.net
or PT 703 - 7900 McLaughlin Rd S, Brampton ON L6Y 5A7

Non-specialists.....*continued from p. 16*

whole world, and he has given the ability to humans to find out scientifically how he does it now and has always done it in the past.

So scientific research is the study of God's regular ways of doing things in our physical world. Science is always the study of God's work. God didn't create everything and set up physical laws to control and sustain creation only to turn his back on it. This is a form of deism. Rather, God applies his active hand to everything that happens in creation.

In recent years scientists have found that human genes are 95-99 percent the same as the genes of chimpanzees and gorillas! Non-Christian evolutionists love this knowledge. Could this possibly suggest that through evolution God created the first humans from monkeys? In Genesis 2:7 God tells us that he "formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life." So God created the first humans from physical material that already existed. But calling this "dust" seems to me like a bad translation, because for us dust means waste debris, throw-away junk.

If God reveals himself to us through science as well as through the Bible, what are we to do when they appear to contradict? When this happens, it very likely means that there are some parts of the Bible we need to understand differently than we have in the past. Maybe there are some things in Genesis that we haven't looked at closely enough. For example, read again the first two verses in Genesis 1. Is that to be included in the six days of creation, or before the six days started? It's pretty open and maybe gives us room to think that maybe much of the material of the physical world was created long before the six days started. And then there is Genesis 4, the description of Cain's sin. God drove Cain away but Cain complained to God that "whoever finds me will kill me." Who would kill Cain, his own family? Probably not, but it might be other people living on the earth. So Cain moved out and built a city. An entire city, just for his family? Doesn't seem likely, and so maybe there were lots of people in the world at this point who were not descendents of Adam and Eve. Genesis 6, which tells us of the daughters of men and the sons of God, may also need fresh interpretation.

The connection between the Bible and science, between God's words and his actions, are sometimes very hard to understand. It may be that no one will ever fully understand how they really fit together, but we should understand some of the basic issues. And we must have patience and tolerance on these difficult matters.

Bob VanderVennen is a member of Grace CRC in Scarborough, Ont. He has a PhD in chemistry and has worked as a research chemist and chemistry professor. He also worked at the Institute for Christian Studies for about 25 years.

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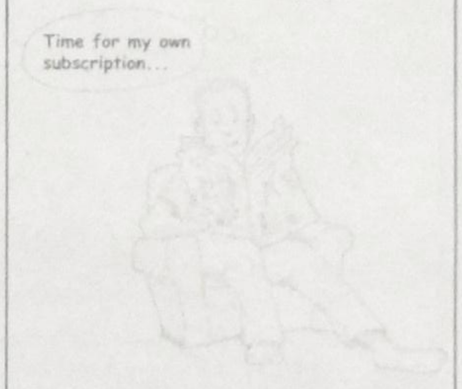

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Please send this by e-mail to agysen.tbcs@gmail.com or by mail to Angela Gysen, TBCS Principal Search Committee, R.R. #2, Site 12-36, Thunder Bay, ON, P7C 4V1.

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Visit the web site at **www.crcna.org** for a complete job description and additional information about BTGMI. To apply send cover letter and resume to **btgmisearch@crcna.org** by February 15, 2012. The process will remain open until a nominee to fill the position is identified.

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Jan 15 Dutch Service will be held in the Ancaster Christian Reformed Church at 3:00 p.m. Rev. John Veenstra will be preaching. DVDs are available.

Feb 17-19 Reformed Marriage Encounter Weekend. St. Catharines, ON Register at reformedme.org

Feb 18-20 Ottewell CRC, Edmonton, AB, will DV celebrate 50 years of God's grace and faithfulness. For more information visit: ottewell@telusplanet.net.

Apr 20-22 Reformed Marriage Encounter Weekend. London, ON Register at reformedme.org

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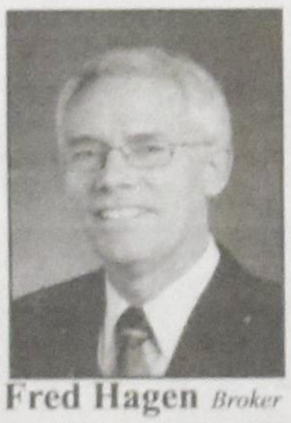

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Billy Graham

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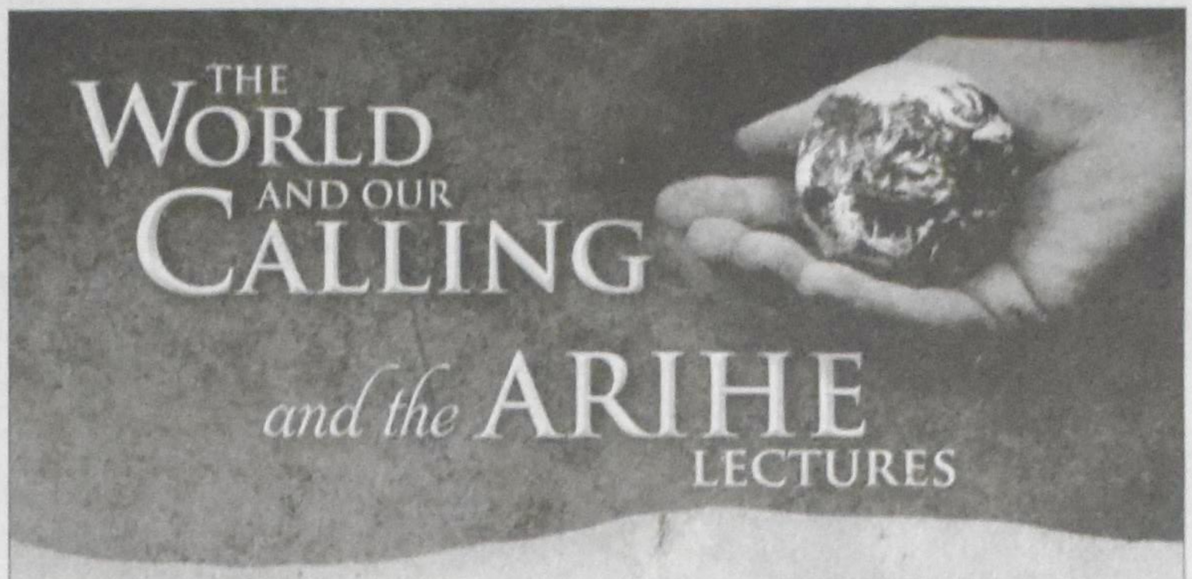

Peace

With eager heart and will on fire,
I fought to win my great desire
"Peace shall be mine," I said;
but life
Grew bitter in the weary strife.

My soul was tired, and my pride
Was wounded deep: to Heaven I cried,
"God grant me peace or I must die,"
The dumb stars glittered no reply.

Broken at last, I bowed my head,
Forgetting all myself, and said,
"Whatever comes, his will be done:"
And in that moment peace was won.

-Henry Van Dyke

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News

Hearts, not minds

Brent van Staalduinen

I can't help but wonder if we're hoping for the wrong things with regards to the so-called "Arab Spring."

Tahrir Square and the Egyptian elections continue to be focal points of the world's hopes for democratic progress in the Middle East, despite the displays of unrest and fragmentation within their cause. The Iranians continue to thumb their nose at international diplomacy by neglecting to hold responsible those who stormed the British Embassy. The Syrian people are caught in a hopeful upsurge of protests but are still brutally oppressed by their own military. Libya, having successfully overthrown the Gaddafi regime under NATO's umbrella, is finding that unity is far more difficult than rebellion. The Palestinian bid for statehood, once so moving a gesture, has been waylaid by politics in and around the UN. And so on.

It seems like each surge of optimism is quickly overshadowed by the fragmented realities of the region. We hope for the best as people protest or rebel and find ourselves caught up in the optimism of such gestures. Maybe this time things will change, we say, as we passively click through websites and social media and television.

But let's be honest – if we look back at the countries that have made news over the course of the past months, the actual results of the revolutions and protests are less than encouraging. Power struggles, corrupt systems, tribal loyalties, and Islamic infighting have not been abolished – quite the contrary, many of those abhorrent things have moved quickly to fill leadership or governmental gaps as soon as the media was distracted by the next story.

Inserting unchecked optimism into a conflicted calendar is nearsighted. Egypt might not be ready to answer to its own elections. Syria thuggishly continues to kill its citizens. Israel and its allies will not back down. Palestine is divided geographically and politically. Iran merely laughs at the idea of listening to anyone other than itself. No one really knows what to say to the Libyans. Fundamental Islamists region-wide rile up their followers to protest, launch rockets and blow themselves up.

By looking at charts and graphs and colour-coded maps, it becomes the norm to fixate on political manoeuvring and revolutions to predict the direction and progress of the Middle East. The western media prods us in that direction – revolutions and protests that seem tied to a desire for peace and prosperity make for good copy. Even the recent focus on Social Networking as having a profound effect on freedom movements gives people – western, e-connected people, at any rate – a reason to hope for the best, consuming incredible volumes of airtime and bandwidth.

This image depicts the planting of democracy in Egypt's Tahrir Square. But are we hoping for the wrong things in Arab Spring?

However, those things merely represent our ability to watch and analyze from a distance, applying the rationalism we have fostered in the west. There is a more basic reality at play in the Middle East, one that is occasionally recognized, but almost always glossed over.

'I would kill them'

One of my most distinct memories from my time in Kuwait is a discussion in my Grade 11 Media Studies class during the 2005 Danish Mohammed cartoon controversy. The class had been asked what they would say to the cartoonists if they had the opportunity to meet them. Without even waiting to be called upon, Reem – a calm, educated, articulate, young Kuwaiti woman with political ambitions – said, "Nothing. I would kill them."

I was shocked, and yet over four years in Kuwait, I would learn that Reem's heart-first answer was more than common – it was the norm. The smallest offence or dispute against Islam or tribe – real or perceived – would prompt immediate, passionate, and sometimes violent response. And this was pervasive at every level of society, from labourer to elite; when matters of tribe and religion were involved, reason was thrown aside. Reason is often the first victim of political correctness, but much of the Middle Eastern population is illiterate and largely raised by a mix of tribal loyalties and second-hand religious dogma. As such, a whole region is being fed by a mindset that seems antithetical to the idea of progress and stability.

As foreign as this might seem to Westerners, who tend to pride themselves on rational, reasonable approaches to world events, there is a paradoxical glimmer of hope for people of faith. As the western world distracts itself with analysis and commentary and political wrangling, we Christians have the ability to access that part of ourselves which allows us to say that we believe in something beyond reason and rationality. We can relate to our Middle Eastern brothers and sisters in a way that is not public or political or analytical, but emotive.

Faith is not rational.

I certainly am not suggesting that we ignore the politics and the media when we evaluate what is happening in the Middle East. We should continue to pray for political and international solutions to the unrest and violence. But we must go further and pray for a complete transformation of belief systems, for a total change of heart, for a region that speaks and acts first from its tribal and religious instincts and beliefs.

Because it won't be peace envoys or summits or negotiated settlements that affect this transformation – human efforts will unfortunately continue to fall short. God needs to step in for real change to begin, and we need to petition straight from our hearts, on our knees, that he will do just that.

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Odds and Trends

Most of us are painfully aware that we're still embroiled in a slow recovery from the last recession, and possibly even poised on the brink of further financial cataclysm. But apparently art dealers didn't get the memo. Despite financial woes in pretty much every other sector of culture, the high priced – and often highly pretentious – world of fine art hasn't suffered at all. For instance, a pile of cast-off barstools reconfigured as a nest recently drew $575,000 at the Art Basel fair in Miami. Even more lucrative was an installation featuring a blue lozenge strategically positioned atop a white triangle. Selling price? $1.5 million. (Incidentally, the starting bid for my own masterpiece, an original work entitled "Barstool nest with lozenge on triangle" will be $2 million – interested parties should direct their inquiries to editor@christiancourier.ca). So what's the secret to high-priced artistic success? According to Ernst Breyeler, one of the founding dealers of the Art Basel exhibition, "If I can't sell something, I just double the price." Some people, it turns out, prefer to pay more than things are actually worth and view the added expense as the prize itself. Too bad most employers don't think this way.

Other people who don't think this way but should, according to the prominent civil-rights historian Taylor Branch, are university administrators. Branch argued recently in *The Atlantic* that the structure of American college sports is completely broken, in that intercollegiate athletics generate billions of dollars for universities and private companies alike but virtually nothing for the athletes who make them possible. Branch marshals a wide array of data in support of his case, including a number of common-sense defying anecdotes about student athletes who could barely afford bus fare while their universities and the NCAA were profiting from reproducing the athletes' likenesses on promotional material. Another story Branch relays involves an unfortunate student athlete who loses his athletic scholarship as a result of bureaucratic tampering and finds himself saddled with an unanticipated tuition bill. Not to make light of this serious situation, but perhaps pursuing an art major would have been more lucrative.

If you just chuckled at my joke (yeah, that was supposed to be funny), you did so because your expectations had been momentarily reversed: normally we're accustomed to thinking about the overpaid athlete and the starving artist. Upon having what you thought you knew upended, your brain was forced to register the "error" and react by momentarily adjusting your assumptions to account for the new information. And therein lies the sensation of mirth, at least according to a recent book by Matthew Hurley, Reginald Adams and Daniel Dennett. Hurley, Adams and Dennett argue that we make sense of the world through an endless series of assumptions or "best guesses" based on what we think we know. This is a way of streamlining decisions and being mentally efficient. But since we deal with staggering amounts of data and often have to negotiate complex situations, we're bound to make mistakes. Humour, then, according to Hurley, Adams and Dennett, is the little pulse of reward that the brain gives itself for identifying and correcting an error. If you do end up laughing at the following joke, take a moment to think afterwards about the correction your mind had to make:

Two young boys were walking home from Sunday school after hearing a sermon about the devil. One said to the other, "what do you think about all this Satan stuff?" The other boy replied, "Well, you know how Santa Claus turned out. It's probably just your dad."

On behalf of dads everywhere, you *did* make the correction right?

Michael Buma